Interview with Lawrence Lesser

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

LAWRENCE LESSER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is August 12, 2002 and this is an interview with Larry Lesser, L-E-S-S-E-R. It's actually Lawrence Lesser?

LESSER: It is actually, yes.

Q: Lawrence Lesser. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Well, to go with Larry, let's start at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born and then we'll start talking about your family?

LESSER: I was born in 1940 in New York City.

Q: Let's start first with your father. What was the background of the Lessers?

LESSER: Well, my family on both sides were Jewish immigrants who came to America in the early 20th Century. Both of my parents were born in New York City so that makes me third generation.

Q: I assume Lesser is a contraction of something? Do you know what?

LESSER: Yes, oddly enough nobody can say definitively what the name was when my grandfather reached Ellis Island, but it probably was pronounced something like “Less-chinski.”

Q: Were they coming then from Russia then, Poland?

LESSER: On my mother's side from Poland and Lithuania and on my father's side from Russia.

Q: How about your father's parents? What sort of business, what were they doing?

LESSER: My father's parents struggled mostly without success. My grandfather on my father's side was a bad example of an immigrant to the U.S. He never amounted to very much. In fact, he and my grandmother actually divorced after being married for 38 years which was extremely rare in that generation.

Q: Well, then, was your grandfather sort of persona unknown or?

LESSER: Well, I knew him briefly when I was little, but my own memory of him is very sketchy. My father had issues about his father and didn't talk about him much.

Q: What did your father do?

LESSER: My father, growing up in a poor household, was the third of six children. He left school after the 8th grade and worked for a living. He eventually started a small business and became quite successful. The business was Pro-Tex Process, and they did dry cleaning of interior decorations - rugs, furniture, upholstery - in New York City. He retired in his '50s and lived out the rest of his life in Florida with my mother. He was somewhat frustrated that he still had a lot of energy and didn't have appropriate outlets for his energy. My mother still lives down in Florida.

Q: Now, on your mother's side, what do you know of her parents and family?

LESSER: Her father grew up in Warsaw. She came from a little better established family so I think that my father married up when he married my mother. He became a furrier in the New York City fur trade. I believe that his father was a tailor, so it was consistent with the background. They lived a comfortable, middle class life.

Q: Then you were born in 1940. Did you grow up in New York City?

LESSER: I did.

Q: How did you find family life? I mean in the first place, was it an Orthodox Jewish family?

LESSER: Oh, no. It wasn't religious at all. Except I was bar mitzvahed. My parents made sure that my brothers and I got some religious education, but my parents practically never went to the synagogue. We were very conscious of our Jewishness, but it was ethnic more than religious.

Q: What about politics? One always thinks particularly in the Jewish community of such a strong sort of socialist element. Did you read Forward, the Yiddish newspaper, and all that?

LESSER: In my family, in my neighborhood, my school friends, many of them were from politically active and left wing families. I wasn't really aware of that growing up. I sort of came to realize that many years later. My own family was not politically active. We were conventional, liberal democrats, mainstream: I'd have to say we were even 'assimilated.'

Q: Own a business or operators.

LESSER: That's right. Yes, it was a small business, really. A very hands-on business. My father was completely familiar with every element of his business.

Q: Did you get involved with it as a kid?

LESSER: I did. I worked summers once I was old enough to work in the business. I had three younger brothers. Each of us had our own turns working there. It was something of a disappointment to my father to learn ultimately that none of us intended to follow in the business. He ended up selling out profitably and having a relatively comfortable retirement, but that wouldn't have been his first choice. He would have liked to pass the business on to his sons.

Q: What about home life? I always ask about were there conversations around the dinner table of events. Was the world sort of brought within the family or was it not?

LESSER: That's an interesting question. I haven't thought about it much recently. I think we had lively and interesting family conversations and a lot of it was about world events, not just narrow events. I was growing up in the McCarthy period and although my family was not directly touched by McCarthyism, we were very angry about it and so I remember being very aware of Senator Joe McCarthy even when I was a preteen.

Q: How about the Rosenbergs? Was that something you thought about?

LESSER: Well, I was aware of the Rosenberg case, but I honestly don't remember. That was a few years earlier and my own political consciousness was not engaged yet. I knew a little bit about it, but not to have an involvement or my own views.

Q: Let's talk about even before you get to high school. Were you getting sort of a tradition of go out and get an education and read. Who was the pusher, your mother, your father, both?

LESSER: There was never any question; in any case I didn't need any pushing.

Q: What subjects were you interested in?

LESSER: When I was little I think my first ambition was I was going to be a farmer or maybe a fireman or maybe a ball player. By the time I was in high school I was thinking about becoming a psychiatrist or a novelist or a college professor.

Q: Your aspirations were going down.

LESSER: That's right, but I was young. Anyway, I didn't end up doing any of those - not so far.

Q: How about reading? Do you recall any books or types of books that grabbed you?

LESSER: My fourth grade teacher told me and told my parents that I should read biographies and I thought that's wrong, I don't want to do that. From that day to this I've read very few biographies. I was an avid reader of fiction and in my early teens, science fiction and can I say serious fiction? Also comic books: Superman, Batman, the Justice Society of America, and later, the gruesome early EC horror comics.

Q: Well, I was going to say, it was the heyday of great science fiction even though it was in pulp magazine. I mean, you know stuff that still rings very true today. It was a great time.

LESSER: I don't know, I gave it up and never went back.

Q: Where did you live in New York? Were there sort of street gangs or were you removed from that type of thing?

LESSER: In the formative years from age nine to graduating from high school I lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and yes, there were street gangs but I wasn't much affected by that. It wasn't until years later that it occurred to me that all those years when I was worried about getting away from the street gangs, why didn't I ever consider being one of the members of the gangs and intimidating other people. But again that's the sort of thing you don't think of until much later. The Upper West Side compared to later times

was pretty tame. I mean, you know, it was possible to get mugged and get into fights and I did a few times and got robbed at knifepoint, but I never thought of it as being a dangerous neighborhood or a dangerous world.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

LESSER: I went to the Bronx High School of Science, New York public high school, city wide.

Q: Well, this is a very good school.

LESSER: Yes, sure.

Q: What were you, I mean, you know, it's top rated. Why science?

LESSER: I don't know. I think a lot of my friends wanted to go to Science. We considered it the best public high school and there was no question I was going to be at a public school. Science was the best high school in the city and that's where I wanted to go.

Q: How did you find it there? Was it, I very often have the feeling, I've talked to a number of people that have graduated from there and I think I've talked to one person who was Protestant and said that they really felt out of place.

LESSER: Well, I didn't feel out of place. I might feel out of place today, but actually you know, it's too bad if somebody feels out of place, but thinking about myself, I think to my core I'm a cultural relativist so I would resist admitting that I felt out of place in any mixture of people. I sort of think of myself as somebody who can find a place, but Science certainly wasn't a problem.

Q: When we talk about Science, what are we talking about?

LESSER: Well, you mean the school or the subject?

Q: Yes, the school.

LESSER: It was a high school of a little over 2,000 kids, about 60% male, 40% female, in a very unprepossessing building in the Bronx. You had a bunch of people who had high standards so we were expected to do well, who were very hungry to learn and who had a lot of independent thinking. It was a very stimulating environment.

Q: How did you find the teachers? Were they sort of, more on the leftist side of things, you know, the ones who were teaching history or things that were open to being left or right?

LESSER: I honestly couldn't say. I was not politically a very sophisticated person at that time and most of the subjects were science and math and literature. I didn't have much of a sense of a slant.

Q: Were you pointed towards anything?

LESSER: I must have been, Stu, but I'm damned if I could tell you what.

Q: Well, you were pointed towards doing well I guess.

LESSER: Doing well, yes. I was already a generalist. I was not pointed to something specifically scientific or mathematical. I had a good enough aptitude and I was interested in those subjects, but I never thought I was going to be an engineer or a scientist or anything really closely related to that.

Q: Were your parents pointing you toward anything?

LESSER: It's sort of taken as a given that my father would have loved for one of his sons - one of the sons who wasn't going to take over the business, and that didn't happen - to become a lawyer, and that didn't happen either. I think he would have been very happy if I'd gone to law school.

Q: What extracurricular activities did you get involved in?

LESSER: I was a ballplayer and athlete of no great skill, but very great enthusiasm. I was co-captain of the track and cross-country team at Science.

Q: Well, then where did you go to college?

LESSER: I went to Cornell University.

Q: Cornell. Why Cornell?

LESSER: Well, I had a New York State Regents scholarship, so you could only use it in state and that's the best school in New York State I think. I wanted to leave the city. I wanted to be out on my own. You know, the slogan of Cornell, Ezra Cornell told the New York State legislature “I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.” That appealed to me. The story, the apocryphal story is that a legislator said, well, Ezra, that's wonderful, but then everybody will want to go there and he replied, yes, but wait until you see where I put it. Of course the weather in Ithaca, New York, is cold and rainy and snowy. At any rate I wanted to go to a big school where you could study anything and do anything.

Q: So, you went to Cornell from when to when?

LESSER: From '57 to '61.

Q: I was just thinking, how did you find, what was Cornell like when you went there in '57?

LESSER: Well, that period has sometimes been characterized as the silent generation, the latter part of the Eisenhower years. Cornell has always been in some ways the Berkeley of the East where the political dissidents find a voice, and we did have some activity in those days. God help us, we had panty raids.

Q: You might explain what a panty raid was.

LESSER: Frankly, I don't remember what it was. I do know that there were large numbers of undergraduates who were protesting very noisily and approaching violence over a proposed policy that would bar coed visiting at the end of dates in the female dorms and maybe in other venues as well. That was quite an issue. It aroused very great passion. A woman named Teresa Summerville I believe her name was, was the villainess of the piece and she, I don't know what her position was, but it was a disciplinary one and a security related one. She said that the university acted in loco parentis and us kids said, you can't do that. So student activism back then involved panty raids and whether a male student could be in a female student's room. That's in very stark contrast to less than ten years later when Vietnam became an issue and people on college campuses were getting worked up over important things.

Q: What sort of courses were you taking?

LESSER: I was an English major and I stayed very close to the humanities, English, literature, history, philosophy.

Q: An English major. Do they have kind of English majors; English faculties go through periods of what they're looking at. How did you find the English faculty at that time? What were their interests?

LESSER: I'm afraid I'm a little bit too much of a superficial person to be able to characterize it much. If I'd gone to Yale, there was something significant going on there. The “new criticism” had taken hold and there was an ideology related to teaching English literature. Cornell was more traditional and old fashioned and had a scholarly approach. No more scholarly than Yale, but we had a number of professors who published deeply and there were people of very admirable intellectual qualities. I was very proud to be in the English department.

Q: Did you find you were concentrating on any particular bit of English literature?

LESSER: I gravitated towards American literature and specifically American fiction. I was also editor in chief of the undergraduate literary magazine, elected to that in my sophomore year. So, I was not only studying, I was also publishing new literature and at that time we had a couple of the leading undergraduate writers: a young fellow named Richard Farina who became modestly famous as a novelist and then got killed in an accident just a few years later. Another young fellow named Thomas Pynchon who is now widely regarded as mysterious and unknowable, but I knew him when he was an undergraduate. A very nice fellow and he was very good to me. He was a few years older. He was a Korean War veteran.

Q: I can't remember the timing, but was the Beat Generation sort of having its impact on literature at that time?

LESSER: Yes, that's about right.

Q: Jack Kerouac and others.

LESSER: Right and there was an Eastern wing that was related to that. We had a number of Korean War vets on the Cornell campus who were older than the usual run of students and had seen more of the world and had smoked pot.

Q: Oh boy. The depths of depravity I guess.

LESSER: Actually that is a milieu that I never had much exposure to and quite deliberately, but also I mean it wasn't hard not to have exposure. It didn't come looking for me and I wasn't looking for it either, so I'm considered in my family to be a strange breed of person who never had any experience with the drug culture.

Q: Well, then, while you were doing this were you pointed towards anything? I noticed while you were there, you were there during the election of 1960, did you get involved in that? I mean for many young people on both sides the Nixon/Kennedy election engaged them much more than many others did.

LESSER: I was involved, but not with both feet. I strongly favored Kennedy and I don't recall that I worked particularly hard. It was still a year before I was eligible to vote myself because the voting age was still 21 then, so I never got to vote for Kennedy.

Q: Did Kennedy or Nixon come to Cornell?

LESSER: I never saw Kennedy. I did eventually see Nixon in New Delhi, India during the period when he was in the wilderness getting ready to come back in '68.

Q: Well, then as you were approaching 1961 when you were going to graduate, what were you thinking of doing?

LESSER: I had decided by then that I was interested in literature, that I was gong to be an academic and so I did the natural next step which was to go to graduate school. I got a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship which is intended primarily to encourage people to become college teachers and that was what I thought I would do. I went to the University of Minnesota and got a masters there.

Q: So, that was '61 too?

LESSER: '63.

Q: '63 at Minnesota. What was the university there like? Did you find this a different place?

LESSER: Well, sure, different, but not difficult to appreciate. Minnesota is two or three times as big as Cornell. It also had a very distinguished English department. There I was not only a graduate student, but also, a graduate teaching assistant. So, I was teaching

the basic freshman English course. The first year I was teaching English Bob Dylan was a freshman at Minnesota. We had something like 200 freshman English classes so the odds were small, but I was that close to being Bob Dylan's freshman composition teacher. I was taking the first steps towards being a college teacher.

Q: I'm coming back to the time today into the '90s when English literature was sort of going through a, I would put it a crazy time, but it's sort of deconstruction. They're trying to find the inner meaning to everything, that was not the scourge at the time you were there?

LESSER: No, I don't think so. We were pretty straightforward. One of the most impressive values of the Minnesota English department was a commitment to the language as it is spoken, that spoken English is English and conveying the meaning, communicating is the fundamental primary function of language and therefore, we were not prescriptive users of English, we were descriptive. I like that. I liked it very much. You know, when people say ain't ain't in the dictionary, that's the other view. At Minnesota, we'd say, listen to what the people say, do you understand what they're saying? Then that's English. I liked that very democratic and tolerant approach. We also had some distinguished writers on the faculty; the one who influenced me the most was Allan Tate, one of the Southern school. I took a writing class from him, which I still remember very vividly.

Q: Were you still having this idea of maybe being a writer as well as a teacher?

LESSER: Oh, yes, without question.

Q: Did you try any different styles?LESSER: I was writing then as I have all my life. I mean I got paid for it as a Foreign Service Officer - as a reporting officer - but I also all my life have been writing more imaginative stuff. It wouldn't be nice to describe Foreign Service reporting as imaginative, but I was writing short fiction at Cornell. Vladimir Nabokov was teaching there and I was at Cornell at the time when Lolita came out and projected him

into the first rank albeit controversially. I was influenced by him and imitated him in some of my writing. At Minnesota I was writing poetry and short stories.

Q: I was just thinking in the '30s and '40s and into the '50s I read a lot of fiction and I almost could have taken a degree in being Jewish in New York City from this. There was great stuff, but you know, "What Makes Sammy Run," I mean, did you ever get into the sort of my life as a Jewish kid or something like that or not?

LESSER: No, that isn't my subject. I've always been somewhat reluctant to apply generalizations about groups and my most characteristic, as I see it, approach to experience in dealing with people is you are whoever you are. Tell me who you are. I'm going to see you as an individual. I'm not going to categorize you with a certain sect - ethnic, racial, national, linguistic, whatever. So you know, as a natural extension of that, when I write, when I adopt the persona of an author, I guess I could choose to be a particular type of person, but my natural bent is to be kind of no special person except a good observer.

Q: I was thinking about at Minnesota, for instance, in American literature - the rather dour Scandinavians, long winters, and dealing with all that up in that area.

LESSER: There's another strain though, especially in Minneapolis, real go-getters, people who are ahead of the curve and very democratic, very egalitarian. You know, if you listen to National Public Radio and hear the stations that feed in. Well, you've got the one in Philadelphia, you've got Boston and New York and Washington and you've got Minneapolis and Los Angeles. Minneapolis is way ahead of most places in being cutting edge and ready to try things that are a little bit different. I found that very agreeable of course. I didn't know I was going to encounter it before I went there. I was sort of sticking my toe in the icy water of moving further from home.

Q: What did the job market look like for English professors?

LESSER: I never got to the point of testing it because we're now talking the period of '61 to '63. Kennedy was president. The Peace Corps was being assembled and deployed when I was finishing up my masters program. I was already married by then; I married between my first and second year at Minnesota to a New York Jewish girl. We both sort of thought what's our hurry? We've been in school a long time, it's been great, but you know, this would be a good time to step out and do something different and really nothing to lose, can come back later and get my Ph.D. which I wasn't sure I looked forward to, but that was going to be a requirement if I was going to be an academic. So Harriet and I applied to the Peace Corps and said we'll go wherever you want to send us.

Q: Well, what was your wife's background?

LESSER: She grew up in the Bronx, she went to New York City public high schools, but not the same one as I did. I met her at a summer community where she was a counselor and where my family had a small summer house and I came up on weekends. We met and started dating and we had a fairly lengthy courtship in part because a lot of it was by long distance. She was and is an artist, painter.

Q: Where did she go to school?

LESSER: She stayed in New York City. She went to Hunter College.

Q: So, you were in '63, you joined the Peace Corps. How was the Peace Corps, I mean what happened?

LESSER: We joined the Peace Corps. They called and said congratulations; we're going to send you to the Philippines where you will be assistants to primary school teachers. We said that sounds great and went to the library and started taking out books about the Philippines and told people that's what we're going to do and where we're going. Two or three weeks later I got a telephone call from Washington at a time when nobody should have been home and we didn't have a telephone message machine. It was somebody

from the Peace Corps saying the Philippines program has been postponed indefinitely so that's off. I thought, I hope this is a joke because I don't have a plan B. I don't know what we are going to do if we don't go in the Peace Corps. So, the person said, we'd like you to go to Nigeria where instead of being assistants to primary school teachers, you will be English teachers in a secondary school. To me back in '63, Africa seemed a lot scarier than the Philippines, but frankly I didn't know anything about either place and we had sort of emotionally made our commitment to doing this and hell, I mean, the Peace Corps is a government agency. They wouldn't send us to our doom. So, we said, yes, okay, that's great, we'll do it. That turned out to be a life-changing lucky break because looking back on it the idea of being the assistant to an elementary school teacher in the Philippines, I don't think I could have handled that for two years. That would have been far too much in the background. But instead, we went to Nigeria. We went to what turned out to be a technical school, a post-secondary school where I taught not only English - it happened to be commercial English - but also British economic history for which I was not initially prepareany better than my students, but I was able to get a day or two ahead of them and together they and I did quite well. Harriet also taught English at the same school; she was in the secondary school division and I was in the technical school. We had our own classes (we weren't assistants). We were the masters of the classroom and it was a glorious experience.

Q: You were there in Nigeria from when to when?

LESSER: From New Year's Day of '64 until December of '65.

Q: Yes, you took grad school from when?

LESSER: '61 to '63. Then Peace Corps training that fall and that's right, New Year's Day, '64 I actually was flying over the Atlantic on New Year's Eve and the pilot announced every hour that it was now New Year's in that time zone, so yes, '64 to '65.

Q: Where in Nigeria did you serve?

LESSER: What was then Eastern Nigeria. At that time newly independent Nigeria had four states. The country had only become independent in 1960. Nevertheless, we were the second generation of Peace Corps volunteers. Harriet and I were assigned to a school where there had previously been two Peace Corps volunteers. Here we were in a brand new, newly independent country, and by the way, a country which was being hailed as the model for African development and African democracy. Hard to remember when you consider what a rocky history Nigeria has had in the last 30-plus years. It started out looking like it was situated to be a great example of the transition from colonialism to democracy. We were in Eastern Nigeria which only a couple of years later became the breakaway state of Biafra in the Nigerian civil war, which caused the Peace Corps to withdraw from the country. We actually completed our tour in December of '65 about five or six weeks before the first military coup, which means we left before there was any trouble at all, much less war. So, we had a normal tour of duty there.

Q: How were you received by the school? Were you in a city or a town?

LESSER: We were in a city: Enugu, the regional capital. The Peace Corps apologized for putting us there, but they said in order for the organization to be accepted, we have to show that our volunteers have credentials that qualify them to teach anywhere, so although you might prefer to be pioneers out in the bush building a school from nothing - and some of the volunteers will do that - but you Lessers, Harriet and Larry, we're sending you to a government technical institute in Enugu, the regional capital, and you'll be teaching on a faculty of mostly expatriates from Britain, Ireland, South Africa, Ceylon, India, Pakistan, Canada - the English-speaking world - plus a few Nigerians, and the school had a kind of elite student body who were preparing for a London City & Guilds examination (that was the reason I had to teach British economic history). We lived in a

relatively cosmopolitan setting and for good reason, a good reason institutionally, but it meant that we didn't have what you might regard as the classic Peace Corps experience.

Q: Well, how did you find the faculty received you?

LESSER: I would say we were received very well. We were needed. There wasn't anyone else who could teach the courses we were teaching, and our academic credentials were fine. We were very well qualified. I had already been a university teacher in the States. My wife was not as highly qualified in that sense, but she wasn't teaching the post-secondary students either. Interestingly, I mean to situate this in time, we got there in January of '64. Kennedy had been assassinated in November of '63; we were in Peace Corps training at UCLA when the assassination occurred and everyone knows what they were doing then and everyone's life was altered by that. When we got to Nigeria it was only six weeks or so later and it was shocking to learn how the killing of Kennedy was interpreted in Africa. At first, until you get a sense of the cultural differences of people in other lands, it comes as an enormous shock, but the students took it for granted that there was some kind of conspiracy. Well, okay the Warren Commission didn't, but a lot of other Americans then and even more since then still do, but I didn't. I was shocked because people said, you know, LBJ must have had something to do with it because look who's president now. Initially I couldn't even respond to that, it was such a shocking thing to hear. Of course Kennedy was very highly admired by Nigerians, and by people all over the world I suppose, and it was a very humbling experience to learn how important this American image was that we represented. To get back to the basic question you're asking, people were very interested in and very welcoming to me and my wife.

Q: Well, how did you find concern for teaching British economic history? So much of Africa latched on to the British former colonies, latched onto the Fabian socialist side and all which you know, I'm stating my prejudice, I think it was a great disaster. But, be that as it may, did you find that the course was weighted towards this or not?

LESSER: I tend to be a bit of a simplifier. The great discovery I made that enabled me to teach British economic history was that another name for British economic history is “the industrial revolution.” That's very meaningful to Nigerians who were experiencing their own industrial revolution at a very speeded up pace and with a lot of things out of chronological order because, for example, people had transistor radios all over the place, but they didn't have electricity in the villages. It was an odd way of approaching things, but basically the story was how an agrarian society gets transformed into a modern industrial society and that was deeply meaningful to the Nigerians. The students got right into that. With that kind of simple, what's the word, framework, I could learn ahead of them and we could fit it in and say, here's what's happening folks. Here's what railroads did, here's what prestressed concrete does, here's all of the industrial things.

Q: Were the students for the most part Ibos?

LESSER: Yes, they were, not all, but most.

Q: This has always been, the group has been touted as really the most sort of intellectually aware or whatever you want to call it, upward striving group. How did you find them?

LESSER: I would agree with that. You know, when the Nigerian civil war came, the Nigerian military government was glad to see the Peace Corps leave because no matter where the Peace Corps volunteers were assigned in the country, that is whether in Iboland or anywhere else, they all seemed to be very sympathetic to the Ibos and to identify very much with the Ibo values. The Ibos were all over the country, as small business entrepreneurs and civil servants, they were the railroad engineers and mechanics. They sold bed frames and transistor radios and ointments. And yet, they were not cultural imperialists.

Q: Do you want to say more about that last thing?

LESSER: Sure. The Ibo value system was that I get ahead by giving you something, making it worthwhile for you. A good bargain benefits both parties. So, Ibos were always ready to negotiate a deal and inherently and certainly the Ibos understood this. The Ibos who were in business and who were getting ahead, the deal is, let me know what you need. I'll see if I can provide it and I'll get mine out of it, but you'll get what you want. So, you had Ibos running the railroads. You had Ibos running the radio stations, you had Ibos in the bureaucracy in the federal government and active in politics, but in general, not asking to be in the top positions, but to be the powers behind the top positions. They sensed, for the most part, that it was contrary to their interests to have too prominent a profile: to use a West African English term, to be too “pushful.” It was a very appealing approach and it was very development oriented. The American Peace Corps volunteers, who were after all development people, were very happy to work with the Ibos. But there are some built-in vulnerabilities there politically that got exposed when the national consensus came apart. Face it, the same qualities that PCVs found appealing, were resented by non-Ibo Nigerians, especially in the Muslim north, where Ibos were outsiders who seemed to be taking over all of the “modern” sectors of society, just as the imperial British were quitting the scene.

Q: How did you find your students? Were they inquiring about the American system and the American way of life or approach to things or not?

LESSER: I wouldn't say that they were deeply curious. As a matter of fact compared to students in other countries when I was in the Foreign Service I didn't sense an enormous hunger to go to the United States, although once again that is something that Ibos did more than other Nigerian ethnic groups. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria, was an Ibo and he was also the first Ibo, and the first Nigerian, I think, to get a degree from an American university. The Ibos started a little bit late. Yorubas were way ahead of them and were oriented much more towards England, while the Ibos who had no hereditary chieftains and instead had a participatory democratic tradition at the village level, and were

perhaps less tied to traditional ways, found themselves more attracted to the American system and the American style - or so it seemed to me and to many of us who were living and working there. At the same time, it was my impression that for the most part Ibos were very happy to be growing up in Nigeria and they were going to put their shoulders to the wheel to make the Nigerian dream come true, that the idea of a Nigerian nationality would be meaningful and realistic.

Q: How did you find the students in class? Were they in a way more interested or thirstier than say the average class that you taught at the University of Minnesota?

LESSER: Probably so. I don't remember that vividly, but...

Q: It doesn't stick out.

LESSER: Yes, but Ibos are debaters. They are arguers and so even though the traditional education method was to learn an awful lot by rote, to learn the answers to questions, you can count on it that if you've got a class full of Ibos you're going to get a lot of arguments and a lot of, well, what if the circumstances were a little different and so on. These were intellectually curious and challenging students.

Q: Did you get around much in Nigeria?

LESSER: Not very much. We did travel into the Islamic north to the north and to the west, the Yoruba country, and went to Lagos, the then-capital. It wasn't that easy to get around because volunteers didn't have cars. On one of the trips my pregnant wife and I were in a train derailment. Nobody was hurt, but we were stuck out in the middle of nowhere for 17 hours on a Sunday near a village but miles from any road. The village - Mada was its name - didn't have provisions for a trainload of people who were stuck there all day; the passengers soon bought out all the Coke, sardines, and package white bread in the little grocery kiosks. Traveling was not that easy to do.

Q: Did you get a feel for the embassy or the Foreign Service while you were there?

LESSER: Not for the embassy, but Enugu was a regional capital and there was a very small U.S. consulate there and that was my first encounter with the Foreign Service. I had never heard of the Foreign Service. You know, I grew up in New York. New York City is very parochial. It's a world unto itself. I had no idea about the conduct of foreign policy or anything of the kind. There was a little consulate in Enugu with two officers and a USIS office, and I did get to know the people there. That is where I first became interested in joining the Foreign Service. I took the Foreign Service written exam in Enugu (because it was given anywhere in the world), and then I learned that I passed it and that I had to wait until returning to the States to take the second part, the oral exam. Once I passed the written, I decided that if I could get into the Foreign Service, that's what I wanted to do. In that sense this series of accidents that landed me up in this little West African corner, very decisively changed the course of my life. I never went back to academia. I couldn't even remember a couple of things about what I had done at Minnesota just a year or two before.

Q: How did your wife feel about this?

LESSER: She was enthusiastic. Of course, she's not my wife anymore. The Foreign Service inevitably, you know, over the long haul, affects...

Q: It takes its toll.

LESSER: It takes its toll. It affects the different people in the family in different ways. Harriet is an artist, as I mentioned, and that's a “portable” profession, so it was compatible with being a diplomat's wife for many years, but eventually her ambitions - to use a word that may sound crass but I don't mean it negatively - and my own ambitions and needs diverged too far to sustain the marriage. But by then our children were practically grown and the end of the marriage wasn't disruptive to them. I like to frame things positively, and I sometimes say that after more than twenty years we ended a successful marriage. And

just to complete the thought, it has worked out very well for both of us and for our children, and we're on good terms.

I'd like to describe our life in Enugu in a little more detail. Since Harriet and I were assigned to teach at a government school in the regional capital, we were given the same expatriate housing as the other expat teachers (and some of the Nigerians). It was a simple but comfortable two-bedroom bungalow on a half-acre plot. Ours happened to be right next to the railroad line. We sat bolt-upright in our bed the first time we heard the blood-curdling shriek of the train whistle in the middle of night, signaling its approach to the station a couple of miles ahead. Once we got used to it we slept right through. Peace Corps gave us a Lambretta motor scooter for shopping and to get around town. Even with that it wouldn't have been practical to teach full-time and run a household consisting of just the two of us. Even in the towns and cities, most Nigerians live with large extended family households, and they divide up the responsibilities. The equivalent for little Western nuclear family households like ours is to hire servants. We could - just barely - afford to do that on our Peace Corps allowances, and that is what we did. We had a cook named Samuel, a part-time gardener, and after our son Richard was born, a nurse-girl named Paulina. I know that sounds more like the Foreign Service image than Peace Corps, but believe me it was the only arrangement that made any sense.

For the most part, Sam cooked British style, or British colonial style - for example, a green curry, served with assorted condiments which he called “gages” - since that was what he had learned. He also did most of the marketing for groceries; inevitably, that meant we were buying more sugar, flour, eggs, and cooking oil than could be accounted for by our own consumption, but you have to be somewhat philosophical about that.

It was a little tricky to function as PCVs, with the special Peace Corps message of living simply and close to the economic level of the local people, and be colleagues with teachers who were quite well paid. Peace Corps was always image-conscious; too much, I thought. There was pressure from headquarters to take away the motor scooters, for

example; not for safety reasons but because it set us at too high a standard. At one point we were told that Peace Corps was considering taking away refrigerators, for the same reason, until the Peace Corps doctors petitioned that they could not take responsibility for the health of the volunteers if they couldn't store perishables safely. I've always been a ball player, and I had an occasional tennis game at the classy hotel in town, which was the only place with a good tennis court. The regional Peace Corps director gently suggested to me that maybe it was inappropriate for a PCV to be playing tennis at that fancy place. I was indignant, saying that I didn't join the Peace Corps to reject the activities I liked, nor to pretend that I would be content to live strictly the same life as the people in the local community. Besides, what would the Nigerians think if I acted like I wanted to give up the rewards of coming from a high standard of living society? One of my Nigerian colleagues told me that he sees no point in Peace Corps Volunteers showing local people that they can live in mud huts. They already know how to do that. They want to get out of huts and live more comfortably, like us.

Last point about life as a PCV in Enugu, Nigeria in 1964 and 1965: Harriet and I were already married more than a year before we joined Peace Corps. Once we were settled in Enugu - not that we didn't have some pretty serious cultural adjustments to make there - we decided to have a baby. Our son, Richard Amaechi, was born early in our second year there, at Dr. Okeke's hospital, locally in Enugu. (Amaechi is an Ibo name meaning “who knows tomorrow?”) His birth was registered on an “alien births register;” thus he doesn't have a claim to Nigerian citizenship. Harriet stopped teaching for a term, and then resumed on a reduced schedule. Peace Corps officially discouraged volunteers from having children, and had the option of terminating our service and sending us home, but in those days in Nigeria - or at least in the more developed southern portion of the country - they were allowing it. As I recall, Richard was the seventh or eighth Peace Corps baby in Nigeria, and the first boy.

Q: Excellent. Let's move on. You left Nigeria in '65 was it?

LESSER: Yes, in December of '65.

Q: You'd already taken the Foreign Service exam. How did that proceed? Did you come back?

LESSER: Came back to New York City, took the oral exam right away, which was I believe in mid-January of '66. Then had to wait to find out whether I would be offered an appointment and knew that at best it was going to take several months. I got a job as a copywriting trainee with the American Management Association. That could have led to a career track that would have been perfectly viable. But I was invited to enter the Foreign Service that June, and that settled it.

Q: By this point, you had pretty well decided not to pursue the academic side, right?

LESSER: That's right.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions or how the oral examination went?

LESSER: I do.

Q: Could you tell me about it?

LESSER: One of the questions was - I remember the committee that was questioning me. They were three formidable people, on a platform, sitting higher than I was, looking down at me. None of them had ever served in Africa. (I asked.) Here I was coming back from two years experience in Africa, so I figured well, that's a break. And one of the questions was Europe has been organizing itself into a vast common market. Would it make sense for West Africa to form a common market? I had just been teaching British economic history and I'd been living in Nigeria and that question was up my alley. (I did end up being an economic officer in the Foreign Service. That was my cone.) So, I liked that question and I figured whatever I said, they weren't likely going to be able to argue

with it. Another question, which gave me a great deal more trouble was, well, you're familiar of course with the Monroe Doctrine. Some people have said that the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine may have some application to Cuba today. This was in the mid-'60s, remember, and Castro was still relatively new in power. I said that I am aware that there is a Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, but I have to admit that I have no recollection of what it is, but I know where I could look it up. One of the panel smiled and took pity on me and explained to me what the Roosevelt Corollary was, which please don't ask me to tell you now.Q: I'll tell you. The Roosevelt Corollary is one of those things that when I took the written exam, I took the three and a half day written exam, that's going way back.

LESSER: Three and a half days?

Q: Three and a half days and there was a question of the Roosevelt Corollary in which I wrote quite a bit. I knew nothing about it, couldn't remember what the hell the damn thing was. I knew it had something to do with Colombia or something. I don't know.

LESSER: Well, we're not going to decide it here. But you know, the answer when you draw a blank like that is, well, I know where to look it up.

Q: Absolutely.

LESSER: Absolutely. When you're doing day to day diplomacy, you don't have to answer all the questions on the spot. Those are two questions I remember. It was a very pleasant thing. They also asked me by the way, what will your wife think about joining the Foreign Service. In those days they were allowed to ask about wives, but of course, the answer was easy because I could say, well, we're just back from two years in West Africa and we liked it and we had a baby there, too. My son was born in Nigeria. That was my answer to the question do you think that your family life can stand it.

Q: So, you spent a few months and then you get called into the Foreign Service?

LESSER: Yes.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop. We'll pick this up in 1966?

LESSER: '66, we're in mid-'66.Q: So, you entered the Foreign Service and we'll talk about that.

LESSER: Thank you.

Q: Okay.

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Today is August 19, 2002. Larry, I assume you went through the usual A-100 course, the basic officer course?

LESSER: Yes.

Q: How did the, I mean this is, you said you hadn't really had an awful lot of experience with Foreign Service people, how did you, what was your impression, your reading of the new people that were coming in with you together in your basic officer course?

LESSER: Well, it so happens I remembered a story about that a couple of days ago and told it to a friend. We were the largest class ever. We were the end of the fiscal year and for some fiscal reason they brought in a very large number of eighty something people, including USIA people and including Foreign Service staff which in those days was a separate category. At the very end of the course when we were sworn in, the then under secretary for management, a fellow named Bill Crockett, spoke to our class. He was the keynote speaker and he said how proud he was that we were, that we were basically a group that reflected America as it was. This was 1966. He said, “I look out over all of you, I can see that you represent every kind of American.” Well, that was very striking to me at

the moment because we did represent many kinds of Americans. We had quite a number of women then and that was a relatively new phenomenon.

Q: Oh, yes in the '60s, yes.

LESSER: It is still in the '60s and we had a lot of people with ethnic names, but there was one thing we didn't have. We didn't have anybody of color, not one. His wording was, as I look out at you, I see, what's the word for the cross section of American society. I thought there were ways he could have addressed that question, but he didn't pick the right one. So after being sworn in we stayed in this gorgeously furnished diplomatic reception room for a nice cocktail party - practice for diplomatic receptions, you could say - and I was talking to one of my newly sworn in classmates. I said, “You know, there's one thing that the under secretary said that really bugged me and that is...” you know, what I was just telling you. The one obvious thing wasn't true, it was obviously untrue that our entering class was representative of the diversity of American society, and he didn't have to say it that way and he didn't have to say it at all if he didn't want to. Well, my classmate who will remain nameless, but I remember him very well, could see something that I couldn't see, because looking over my shoulder the under secretary was walking right towards us. My good friend and classmate said, “Oh, Mr. Secretary, my friend here” - I'm not sure whether he said, my friend Larry Lesser, but anyway, I was identifiable - “my friend here was just saying that he took exception to something in your speech.” Mr. Crockett looked at me and very blandly said, “Oh, I'd be very interested to hear what that was.” I made a little mental note that this fellow who had just done this to me was not going to remain a very close friend. I told Crockett in nice, bland terms what my observation had been and he being a consummate diplomat said, “You know that's a very good point. We're making an effort. We know that it's important that we bring in minorities and African Americans...” and I'm sure the word wasn't African American back in '66.

Q: Blacks.

LESSER: Blacks or I guess he wasn't saying Negroes. Anyway, he gave a very good answer, that is, that we were making an effort and that we were going to do better and I can drop the point that he didn't express himself very well in the speech. I was impressed by the people I came in with. A number of us were returned Peace Corps volunteers. I enjoyed the A-100 course. Let me mention one other point that sticks in my mind from the course. We had a wonderful man named Alex Davit directing the course and towards the middle he decided he had better give us a little pep talk because the natives were restless. A lot of the course consisted of going around to other agencies or letting representatives of other agencies come and talk to us and oftentimes they would say things which really didn't hold the interest of a large number of the people in the class. So, he wanted to address that. He said, “Listen, I know that you're hearing from people who you think don't have much to say to you and I'm not going to argue with that. It may be that some of them don't have much to say, but they are entitled to your ear because you're in the Foreign Service of the United States, you're representing the whole U.S. government and the American people. These agencies have legitimate interests overseas: commerce, agriculture, labor and so on and so forth. They're entitled to talk to you. Some of them will have more interesting things to say than others. If it's a problem for you, if you have trouble staying with it, being there and being in the moment and giving them your attention, then my advice to you is to reconsider this career because one way or another you're going to spend a lot of time everywhere you go being required to be in places and to pay attention and be considerate to people who you may think are, well, to put it bluntly, wasting your time. That's one of the core skills that you need in the Foreign Service.” Well, nobody resigned out of the class, so apparently we all believed we could do it.

Q: It's a very good point to make.

LESSER: Yes.

Q: Did you have anything in mind when you came out, you were going to get right back to Africa or you wanted to try something else? What did you think?

LESSER: I knew that I wanted to go back to Africa, but I wasn't sure I wanted to do that first, and when we were asked for preferences, I put down Latin America as my first preference. A very nice but somewhat patronizing assignments person dissuaded me from that. She said, “Larry you don't impress me as being a manana sort of person.” I was never quite sure what she meant by that.

Q: It probably means laid back.

LESSER: I may well be a manana sort of person, she may have missed on that, and also I'm not sure how that sort of feeds into whether you should go to Latin America, but let it rest. In fact, as things have worked out, in my entire life I have never set foot in Latin America except for a few short days in Mexico. That was my choice, but I never got there. The other thing she said was, you can't go to Latin America just for a single tour of duty; the Latin American bureau tends to hold onto its people, so unless that's where you want to go long-term, don't ask for it. I was pretty much prepared for whatever came. I still thought I'd like to start with some place other than Africa and then return to Africa, and so I went to India first.

Q: You went to India, where in India?

LESSER: New Delhi.

Q: You were there from when to when?

LESSER: I was there from early '67 to early '69.

Q: What was your impression of India from your vantage point when you got there?
LESSER: Well, my vantage point was the embassy and it was almost only the embassy for

reasons which are easy to explain. I was supposed to be going into a two-year rotational program where you'd be in four different sections of the embassy. That program didn't remain in force for very long and the embassy couldn't easily accommodate me in that program because there was a staffing crisis in the consular section. As a result, I went into the consular section less than two months after I got there and I stayed there the whole time. It was just a two-officer section, hard to believe now. Only two American officers in consular affairs and with one of them, the senior one, rotating very rapidly I couldn't go out, couldn't travel around, couldn't take much leave. We didn't have much money anyway, so it may have been for the best. So, I saw India primarily from the vantage point of people who came to the embassy and most of them of course were coming trying to get visas to go to the United States. In my travels, well, India was coming out of a very serious drought and famine disaster not specifically in the New Delhi area, but further east especially in Bihar state. It was a country that was definitely struggling. Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister. I wasn't involved in political or economic reporting, you know, and I never became an expert. The fact that Indira was the Prime Minister meant that relations at the very top were uneasy. She was very suspicious of the U.S. government, and there were a few incidents during that two-year period which exacerbated it. One was the defection of Stalin's daughter in New Delhi which happened just before I started working in the consular section. A few weeks later and I might have been the consular officer who issued her a visa. Another incident was the head of the Smithsonian who was a birdwatcher in the Himalayas in India and Nepal and became suspected of being really a spy because of the stories in the late '60s about CIA money going into otherwise innocent organizations to help finance their being able to see whatever they saw and write reports on whatever they wrote. But in India it was interpreted as hostile activity. The Israeli six-day war, India took a position that was more pro-Arab than the Arab countries and Indira was criticized for that in the Indian parliament, but once again, it was an uneasy thing. Shortly after my tour there, the AID mission, which actually was responsible for something like 1,000 staff and contract employees, was radically cut and U.S. relations became much less close. We also had at that time a very serious question of what to do with the extremely large rupee

accounts the U.S. government had accumulated through the PL-480 food program. They couldn't be spent by the U.S. government as fast as they were accumulating and it gave the U.S. government an inordinate influence over the stability of the Indian economy. That issue wasn't resolved until some years later.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LESSER: Chester Bowles. A man in history and a great man I think.

Q: Did you run across him at all?

LESSER: Yes, I did. He was very accessible to everybody and most of his country team meetings were rather large affairs, not just limited to agency and section chiefs. Anyway, I was de facto section chief for consular affairs a lot of the time because as I said we had a vacancy in the senior position so I represented the consular section. One small footnote-to-history anecdote, I mentioned that the Indian government took a position that was more anti-Israeli than the Arab countries in the '67 war and Ambassador Bowles was concerned about that because he loved India and Mrs. Bowles loved India and they were beloved by enormous numbers of Indians, including the cosmopolitan ones at the top and including regular folks. So, he said he was going back to the States to do a little lobbying and he says essentially what I'm going to do is, the Indians will have been there and I'm going to come in after them and say, don't pay attention to what the Indians just told you. They don't really know sometimes how to advance their own interests. The Indians will sound very hawkish and anti-Israel, which may be problematical for the U.S. government, but when push comes to shove, the Indians aren't going to make a lot of trouble on these things. Don't take what they say, their public statements, too seriously. Don't let their foolish statements affect our assistance programs because India is in desperate need and the programs are working. Family planning is working; food production programs are working. The small business financing is working. That was a kind of a visionary view. Even at my tender age of late '20s I thought, at some point somebody's got to take

what the Indians say at face value. They have to make their own case and they have to be accountable for what they say. Of course we did go through a lot of years of uneasy relations with India.

Q: I mean it's always been one of the peculiar things, that, here you have this major democracy, really major democracy and the United States and yet they were essentially estranged for a very long time.

LESSER: Yes, indeed. Bowles used to say frequently and it still appears in rhetoric that we are the world's two largest democracies.

Q: Yes. There also has been an underlying theme of the relationship that a number of our ambassadors have sort of fallen in love with India and have you might say given India essentially a free ride as far as we're concerned, well, don't pay any attention to what they say, let's keep, you know, supporting India and all rather than, play it cool both as far as assistance and all that. There were times when Indira and her father turned to the Soviet Union.

LESSER: Well, let me tell you a story about that although it's not from my personal experience but it is reflected in Bowles's writings. I haven't read his version of it, so let me just give my recollection of what he said to the country team. Bowles had two tours of duty as ambassador to India. I was there during his second one. He was suffering from Parkinson's disease and he was beginning to show some effects in terms of not being able to go for long meetings. He was an excellent golfer, for example, but he only would play a few holes because it was as much as his constitution would permit. A few years earlier, Nehru was the prime minister and Kennedy was the president and Bowles's great plan was to address exactly what you're talking about, Stu, and try to get a much better relationship between India and the United States as the world's two great democracies. He put together a package and it was gong to involve military assistance as well as economic assistance and he got approval from the highest level of the Indian government to discuss

it with President Kennedy. He arranged a trip to Washington in order to bring the matter up. He was scheduled to meet with Kennedy on November 23, 1963, buKennedy was shot in Dallas the day before. So, Bowles came back to India. He didn't have a personal relationship with LBJ, but even so, he put the agenda back together again after several months and he scheduled a trip to go and talk to LBJ about an historic shift by which India would reduce its closeness to the Soviet Union and come closer to us. The week before he was to go Nehru died, and Shastri became the interim prime minister, but he didn't have anything like Nehru's power and it was out of the question that he could carry the Indian government into a historic shift of alliances. So, the opportunity was lost once and for all. Bowles told the embassy staff that in addition to the bad luck that made this proposal not happen, he really believed also, and I think he was right, that to make really historic shifts you probably need a crisis. You need everybody to know that the old system is intolerable, that it's broken down irrevocably. You couldn't have made that case on relations with India because India was too remote from the United States and not strategically at the very forefront of our interests. It would be hard to get the attention of people who are very busy worrying about putting out fires or addressing crises around the world when India wasn't one. Still, Bowles thought he got close and thahe might just have been able to carry it off if it hadn't been for those accidents of history - the untimely deaths of JFK and Nehru.

Q: We had a Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, who was consumed by Vietnam.

LESSER: Yes, that's true and he was also really no particular friend of Chester Bowles. Bowles had been exiled to India by the Kennedy administration. There you are.

Q: Now, in the visa section, in the first place, in the consular function, let's take the visa side first. Who was coming, there is a considerable Indian population in the United States today, but that came later on.

LESSER: Well, when you see the people with Indian names who are the heads of cutting edge corporations, dot-coms particularly, but technologically advanced companies, most of those guys got their visas in the late '60s.

Q: Was it mainly students?

LESSER: Yes, more yes than no. We had a very high demand and the largest number were for students. We also had exchange visitors who were sort of the same thing as students, except their sponsorship is different. There was a trickle of tourists and a trickle of business people and of course we had immigrants. The Immigration and Naturalization Act was seriously amended - the end of national quotas occurred during the period I was there and the changeover occurred so that instead of having the largest number of immigrant visas available to people of European origin, it was evenly spread across the entire world according to demand with a maximum of 25,000 from any one country. I don't remember what the world total was, but something like 170,000. There was going to be a mad rush for visas from countries like India where many people could qualify and would want to go for the opportunities. I actually experienced a big wave of applications from Indians at the beginning of the big updraft so that of course gets to what you were saying, that the largest number occurred later. It was more or less directly as a result of the change in the act.

Q: Were you finding any problems with the people who came to you for visas?

LESSER: Every consular officer has this statutory problem that a person applying for a non-immigrant visa, including student visas of course, is presumed to be an intending immigrant unless they can establish to the satisfaction of the consular officer at the time of application that they're going for a legitimate short-term purpose. Well, that can be tricky. If you have a young, bright Indian student who is a recent graduate from the Indian Technological Institute in Kanpur, and he now wants to go for graduate study and you ask him, what do you want to do with your life after that. He hasn't been coached and he

might say, gee I don't know, but it sure would be nice to work for one of the technologically advanced companies - for IBM or Dupont or a pharmaceutical company, and you would have to tell him, well, I'm very sorry in that case you can't get a non-immigrant visa, you can't get a student visa, you'll have to get an immigrant visa. He might say, well, fine, then give me one. You say, not so fast, we don't have them to give because the process, we're backed up. We've got several years wait of people who are already qualified and you haven't prequalified yet. Of course, every Indian student worth his salt already knows that and they would never be so foolish to answer a question like that. It's a little foolish of a consular officer to ask it also, because what are we trying to do here? A young person's life is all before him. It seems to me you don't want to ask him to make a silly commitment.

Q: Well, I think this is one of the things when one tries to be as relaxed, well, it depends where you are. But it's a highly qualified; I was in Korea in the '70s and we had a lot of people, you didn't know what they're going to do, but you never know where a student is really going to end up. As long as they weren't gong to some fly-by-night school in order to bypass the immigration regulations, but it depends on the consular officer.

LESSER: Yes, it depends on a lot of things. During the time I was there a fellow with an Indian surname won the Nobel Prize in chemistry. He was a researcher at the University of Michigan or Michigan State (to the best of my recollection) and he was an American citizen. He had been in earlier years a student visa applicant and had changed status and had become a Nobel Prize winning scientist in the United States. The Indian newspapers had banner headlines saying “Indian wins Nobel Prize for chemistry.” They said, he's an Indian and he won it and it's a pity that the brain drain, which was a popular term at the time, had occurred and we had lost his brain to America. A day or two later one of the Indian papers had an editorial comment which said, we didn't lose his brain, he's got an American brain. If he had stayed in India, who are you kidding, he never could have done the work that produced the Nobel Prize because our labs aren't equipped and our culture doesn't encourage people to that level of excellence. So, the world is a better place because he went to America where he could do what he was so well equipped to do. We

should take pride in it, too, but it's not an issue, it's not something that we should say, shows that we shouldn't let fellows like him get away. I thought, there's an awful lot of common sense there.

Q: Absolutely. Did you have problems with brides going over and that sort of thing?

LESSER: You mean?

Q: Indian young women who are being sent to get married and that sort of thing?

LESSER: You know, I don't recall it as a problem. I understand that it could have been a question. I had a couple of amusing incidents with American men who came over to India to find a bride and bring her back over.

Q: How did that work?

LESSER: One fellow in particular said he had tried American wives and they talk back too much and they just don't mind. He had now studied the matter and he was going to get an Asian bride, and India looked like a very good place for it. He was enough self-conscious to ask me if I was married and I said I was. He said, “Is your wife American?” I said, “She is.” He said, “Well, your wife may not be like that, but the law of averages or the statistical average says that American women don't make good wives and Asian women do. I wish you well in your marriage, Mr. Lesser, but I tried it and it didn't work and I want an Asian bride now.” So, he came back a couple of months later with a young woman from South India who had been at an orphanage. She was, I guess she must have been 16 or 17, but she looked younger. She didn't speak a word of English. She only spoke Malayalam and believe me this fellow didn't speak any Malayalam. But he had selected her. She was very pretty and she looked very alert and it looked to me like given his terms of reference, he'd probably done very well, but now what about her. I thought she's probably doing well, too, because she's an orphan. She has no real future in India and she looks like she's bright and capable and all she needs is a chance. Now I thought he was deluded if he

thought he could bring her to the States and have her wait on him hand and foot and be undyingly grateful that he had brought her to America. It seemed to me that it wouldn't take but a few years before she would learn to drive, learn to watch TV, learn to go to the supermarket, learn to make friends, and figure out what her rights were. If he wasn't a good husband, then he would be an ex-husband and she would have her green card and eventually become a citizen. So, I didn't have any great compunctions about it. There were incidences like that.

I'm very proud to be an American and to have represented the U.S. government, but we're individuals first. We're human beings and we have to think about how best to conduct our own lives. I'm satisfied that I found a good way to conduct mine and I want to be respectful of people I encounter along the way and give them every opportunity to fulfill their own potential.

Q: Did you find this in conflict with your duties as a consular officer?

LESSER: It could be. It could be if you took a very literal and very non-flexible view that your duties were you could be denying people things that a closer analysis would show it would be to everyone's advantage - not just to that individual's advantage, but to everyone's advantage - to have ruled a different way. Certainly the Indian, one time Indian, now American, who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry, the world's a better place because he did that work. A very inflexible consular officer might have said I don't think you're coming back to India and I'm not going to let you go to America. Who would have benefitted? Nobody at all.

Q: During the late '60s and all was the time of the hippie Americans and you know one of the things that inspires them to get out there with the backpacks with hashish and drugs and all this. As a consular officer, did you get involved in the protection and welfare of these?

LESSER: Yes, Mr. Stu Kennedy, I did. Around the embassy I was nicknamed the “hippie control officer.” We didn't have a great many hippies in New Delhi, and the Indian authorities were pretty reasonable. They didn't want to load up their jails with scruffy looking Americans, but from time to time an American would get arrested because he was troublesome to a landlord or misbehaved or lost his mind.

One little anecdote about hippies. I got interviewed one time by the AP correspondent. He might have been a stringer. He asked me about hippies and I told him a little bit about hippies. He was referred to me because I was the consular officer. I said, “I don't actually see very many hippies because they don't like to come to the embassy.” Then it occurred to me to mention to him, “By the way, not all the hippies are Americans anyway.” He said, “Oh, that's an interesting angle. What percentage are Americans?” I said, “Look, for beginners I don't know how many Americans there are because as I already told you they don't check in with the embassy, and I certainly don't know how many are not American.” He said, “Well, you'd be in the best position to make an estimate.” He kind of badgered me and I was a young guy and kind of naive. I said I don't know, I don't know. I said finally, “If I had to pick a number out of the air or out of my ear I would say maybe 30% to 40% are American and not more.” He said, “Okay, thanks.” He wrote an article in which he said blah, blah, less than 40% of the hippies are Americans. Fortunately, he didn't say that that was an official figure given to him by an embassy representative. So, I figured I was out of the woods on that one, but he did say it as though it was the definitive truth. End of story.

Some months later we had some hippie problems that brought a senior police officer to my office, saying they needed a little more cooperation, a little better: “We want to coordinate with you on how to deal with an influx of hippies who are breaking laws.” I received him and we talked and I said at one point, “By the way, you know, I hope you're going to other embassies, too because not all of the hippies are Americans.” He said, “Oh, we know that. Less than 40% are Americans.” I said, “Where did you find that out?” He said, “What do you mean?” I told him the story and I said I'd be very interested if it turned out I was right

and somebody had done a study and confirmed it. But, I said, I have my suspicions. He said, “Oh, yes, we did do a study and it is right.” I didn't think he was sincere and I think he was embarrassed. I don't think anybody ever did a study because it's hard to study, and who cares?

Q: Was there, did you have any problems with American born women marrying Indian students coming back and then having children and having problems leaving the country and not getting along with the family and that sort of thing?

LESSER: I can't say we didn't, but I don't remember any. That seems to me to be something that happened later for the most part. There must have been isolated cases, but I don't remember any.

Q: Often I think particularly you have a society such as India where the family is very close. If sonny boy goes off and marries a foreign wife and comes back and she finds that she's supposed to wait on her mother-in-law and all this and American women don't cotton to this.

LESSER: Yes, indeed. Well, you see, my American visitor who wanted an Indian wife understood that. Yes, I know it happened, it happened, a version of that happened with some good friends of ours there, but it wasn't a consular case.

Q: Were there any provocations problems while you were there?

LESSER: I don't think so. It was a very peaceful time really, even though at the level of the highest politics there were tensions between the United States and India. Not much happened at ground level. We did have what turned into a public order problem on the day that the new immigration law went into effect because Indian visa marketers, visa fixers, had been drumming up business and saying that the United States was going to be recruiting laborers to come. We knew we were going to get a lot of inquiries, but we underestimated just how large the crowd was going to be and we had more than 1,000

people at the door clamoring to get in. We only had a small office really. We hadn't even printed up enough copies of the information, but most of those people, that wouldn't have done much except I guess you could have gotten them to leave if you said, here take this and come back when you're ready. We did actually have to call in the marine security guards to close down the building and get help from the Indian police to disperse the crowd. Of course it wasn't a hostile crowd; these were people who wanted to be Americans.

Q: Under the old immigration law, I used to, you know I was in Dhahran in the '50s and we had people working for airlines on Bahrain where I used to go and these Indians would come up to me and ask were their immigration applications coming along. I dutifully looked over and said, well, it's moved up. Instead of having to wait 112 years, you only have to wait 110 years and they'd smile, you know, progress was being made.

LESSER: Good one.

Q: Did you and your wife, were you able to have any Indian friends or not?

LESSER: Yes, I would say in India it's not difficult to get around in the kind of cosmopolitan level of Indian society. People like to have American friends. I guess I should say liked, but I think it's probably still true and so we did some entertaining, although I was in a nonrepresentational position. It wasn't part of my job. We got a lot of invitations. Indians also, the wealthy class of Indians, can entertain lavishly, so it's not like a couple of my posts in Africa where your African friends really could not invite you to their homes, they just weren't set up that way. In India you had people who were like pashas and they were also well traveled. There's a kind of an international class. I'm sure you hear this in a lot of the interviews. International people are more like each other than they are like the man in the street in their country of origin.

Q: Now, we're moving up to 1969. Did our involvement in Vietnam cause any problems?

LESSER: It was pretty distant in my official life. Again as a consular officer, I'm sure Vietnam figured importantly in our bilateral relations with India, but none of that filtered down to me. Now, that was also the period when Robert Kennedy and then Martin Luther King, Jr. were assassinated. So we, 1968 was a seminal year in America and I wasn't home in the US for a single day of that year and I feel as though that's a hole in my life. I didn't, for that matter know much about the '68 democratic convention where Mayor Daley's minions beat up the demonstrators. I was very distant from that. We were of course generally aware of it, but we didn't have CNN then and so for the most part we got just bulletins on a current basis and the fuller story you didn't get until several days later. If I can get back to the question that triggered all of those reflections, Vietnam was also pretty distant. There was a little pressure on Foreign Service people to volunteer to go to Vietnam. We would get circulars from the Department saying that we're going to give you some career advantages if you volunteer, and I went home to my wife one day and said, you know, I really feel as though I have to consider volunteering to go there. Even though I had very serious reservations about the war, and was very dubious about the kinds of statements - the body counts and McNamara types of things that justified our continued involvement there and said that we were winning and there was light at the end of the tunnel. Even so, I thought well, if people like me don't volunteer to go there, then we're leaving it to the people who I think have poor judgment, so I should volunteer, shouldn't I? My wife said, “Well, if you feel that way, then go ahead and do it, but when you come back you'll have to find a different wife.” By this time I had two children; my daughter was born in India. My son had been born in Nigeria. I had very strong family feelings. I thought, okay, I read you loud and clear and I didn't volunteer and the Department didn't twist my arm to go.

Q: Well, then 1969, whither? Where did you go then?

LESSER: In '69 I was assigned to Ouagadougou in what was then Upper Volta and now Burkina Faso. I went there via 16 weeks of French language training at the Foreign

Service Institute (which is where we're sitting now), but it was located in Rosslyn back then. I got to Ouaga in July of '69.

Q: How long were you there?

LESSER: I was there for two years.

Q: Until '71?

LESSER: Yes. To mid-'71.

Q: Upper Volta. When you arrived there, what was the situation?

LESSER: Upper Volta is a poor country, a landlocked country. It doesn't have a large population by world standards, a big change for me after being in India. It had about five and a half million people at that time. All the same, a kind of oddity. It was the most populous ex-French colony in Africa: more people than Senegal, more than the Ivory Coast, more than Mali, more than any place you can name. All of those countries are countries of relatively small populations. Upper Volta is a fairly large country and it is semi-arid and that's actually being generous. It's arid, almost entirely, and it's extremely difficult to produce enough food to feed a population of five and a half million - and the population was growing at that time. It was then and remains now one of the poorest countries in the world, and probably as a result of that or under pressure from that the biggest foreign exchange earner of Upper Volta was remissions from workers in neighboring countries. That was primarily Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Well over 20% of the male working age population lived outside the country, but their families didn't. So, you had villages which were largely composed of elderly people and children and women with occasional visits from the one who's earning the salary on cocoa plantations or working on the docks closer to the coast. It's not a good formula for national development. The country was run at that time by a military government under General Sangoule Lamizana: a very benign military government. It was my first experience of a country under military rule, but it wasn't my

last. All three of the countries I served in that were run by military rulers were rather liberal soft military rulers. That's colored some of my views of the pros and cons of military versus civilian government.

I was the economic/commercial officer in a very small embassy in a kind of ramshackle building in - I can't call it the middle of downtown, Ouagadougou, because Ouagadougou didn't really have a downtown. It had a traditional market area and we were about a mile away from that, but it was, did I mention that this was a poor country? There was hardly any development, there were a few paved streets but no paved roads between cities back then. Ouaga had been, well, not left behind because it wasn't really; you couldn't say what it should have become. It had virtually no resources. One day I was asked to be the reporting officer on General Lamizana's state of the nation address, an annual address. This was my first French speaking post. I had just learned French before getting there, so I wasn't truly fluent, but my comprehension was coming along pretty well. I was listening to the speech and General Lamizana starts out by saying he's giving a report on the state of our country - “This land, cursed by nature.” And he went right on. I was shocked to my being. Here was a national leader referring to his country as cursed by nature. I'm an American, can you imagine an American saying anything like that; “America, God shed his grace on thee.” Apparently God's grace wasn't extended everywhere. Upper Volta was cursed by nature and that was what they were up against. They may have been the nicest people in the world and they deserved a better country.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LESSER: My ambassador was William Schaufele. A wonderful man, a great role model for me. I am still friendly with him.

Q: What was our interest in Upper Volta?

LESSER: Well, the Kennedy administration had made a policy decision at the time of the independence of all of these former African colonies of mainly Great Britain and France,

but also, Belgium and Portugal and Spain. The German ones had been under League of Nations mandate earlier than that. The decision had been that the United States was going to put an embassy in every country. That's why we had an embassy there. We were showing them that we cared. There were if I remember correctly only eight embassies in Ouagadougou at that time. One was the Nationalist Chinese Embassy, which did have diplomatic status. Another was the Soviets, also France obviously, as the ex-colonial power, Israel because they were collecting votes on issues and they had a little aid program in a lot of African countries including Upper Volta. Ghana, where many Voltaiques worked and lived. So, it was an odd collection of countries. If you looked around, the only country that had reasonably friendly - or at least businesslike - relations with all of the other countries represented there was us. There were political disputes between all the others that made it, that; they didn't talk directly to at least one of the others.

Q: Economically, was it?

LESSER: We had a little AID program. There was a cattle-raising project in the North. You had to figure out how to develop pasture in order to raise cattle and just as barbed wire won the West, it could have won the Sahel as well, but the costs were very great compared to the amount of benefit that you were going to get. There was education, technical education and some family planning and health, but modest programs. There was some hope that Upper Volta could be more viable by having a closer economic relationship with neighboring countries in the region. There was a five-country group of ex-French colonies called the Entente, led by the Ivory Coast, and that was the best they could do.

Q: Did you feel the French looked upon you with suspicion?

LESSER: I don't think they worried about us very much. I found that the French were very friendly to us and I enjoyed my relationship with people in the French Embassy. I suppose they were a little patronizing, but I also suppose I deserved it. I was a beginner in French.

The French DCM who was a man of the aristocracy and a wonderful gentleman was very helpful to my wife and me. No, we didn't have a problem in that way.

Q: Some of those countries during this period were having sort of back down coups and using often French troops to do this.

LESSER: Upper Volta was not in that situation. If they had needed help, they might have done it that way. They kept very close ties to the French and they were sort of, if you wanted to be a little bit dispirited, you could say they weren't so much independent as they were post-colonial. They didn't have the resources. Let me give you an idea. Here's a country of five and a half million people and one time I was in a conversation with a Voltaique about doctors and he mentioned Dr. Joseph Conombo, who was no longer practicing because he was now the mayor of Ouagadougou. He said something like you know, there aren't very many Voltaique doctors practicing in Upper Volta. They had to go somewhere else to learn medicine, usually France. There are a lot of Upper Volta doctors, but they've stayed in France or elsewhere in Europe. I said, “Oh, that's an interesting question, about how many do you think there are in Upper Volta?” I thought he would answer with a number or say he didn't know. The way he answered was, he said, “Let's see. There's Ouedraogo Maurice and there's Sawadogo Marc and there's...” He named five or six. There were more doctors than that in the country, but they were Europeans or at any rate not from Upper Volta. So, how's a country going to develop? People were born with the same potential as in other places, but they had very few opportunities to develop the way we do.

Q: Did we have any Peace Corps?

LESSER: We had Peace Corps. We had a nice little Peace Corps program with 35 or so volunteers and all posted to rural areas.

Q: How did they find it in this country?

LESSER: It's a big country so the physical distances were long and as I said earlier there were no paved roads and the roads they had were all washboard surfaces, so getting around was difficult. They were very impressive people. I was an ex-Peace Corps volunteer myself, but I don't think I would have done very well in Upper Volta. They were doing farm and community development projects and water well digging projects. I know of at least one who later joined the Foreign Service and has had a distinguished career. I wasn't close to the Peace Corps program. We had a very, very capable Peace Corps director, Tom Fox, who has also had a very distinguished career subsequent to that. They managed a very good program. I couldn't tell you that it decisively changed the course of development in Upper Volta.

Q: Did you deal much with the bureaucracy there?

LESSER: Yes.

Q: What was your impression?

LESSER: Again, when I said these are the nicest people in the world I wasn't kidding. I'm not a Pollyanna about that. I've been in countries where I thought it was more difficult dealing with people. The Voltaics are very open, decent people and they have no pretensions about their place in the greater scheme of things. They can see the same thing we can see that they don't have very much to work with. I found it a pleasure to deal with the Upper Volta bureaucracy. They were not afraid to talk to the Americans and they could see that it was to their advantage to be as friendly as they could be and hope that something would come of it.

Q: How about did you get involved in UN votes and that sort of thing?

LESSER: Yes. I'll give you one. I don't remember vividly specific examples except for one. We were given a demarche, a worldwide demarche to make to all governments asking for support on matters of industrial pollution and air pollution. The way I remember this

conversation literally, the fellow I was talking to from the foreign ministry said, I think you should understand that we would like to have industrial pollution and once we do, we'll be quite willing to talk to you about what the next step should be and what to do about it. You can't expect us to get very excited about international rules on industrial pollution when we're a pre-industrial society. You know, there you are.

Q: How did you find, I mean you were able to begin to exercise your economic muscles here, but I imagine in a rather subdued way.

LESSER: Yes, rather subdued, but you know, of course I had the economic portfolio all to myself and we had an annual reporting schedule that was in many ways the same for little embassies as it was for large ones. There was no distinction made. It wasn't until the mid-'80s that we got a special embassy program that said that small embassies would not be required to do everything, all the reporting. I had to do an annual budget report and I had to do an annual minerals report for the Bureau of Mines, and different departments, and I did them. The budget of the Upper Voltan government was published and I studied it closely and did an analysis of it. I could see the salary of the president and understood that if things went extremely well for him he might be able to make as much money as I was making as a junior officer in the embassy. He lived in a better house I suppose, although I was living quite well, too. During the time I was writing the budget report I happened to get a fundraising solicitation from my alma mater, Cornell University, and they said they were trying to meet an annual budget which was getting harder to meet, etc. and they hoped alumni would chip in. It occurred to me as I was looking at that that the annual budget for Cornell University was four times as great as the annual budget for the government of Upper Volta. Nobody was writing an annual budget report from the State Department on Cornell so that did give it a little sense of perspective. All the same, there was something worth reporting about the Upper Volta budget; how much were they spending on military equipment for example? They needed everything they could get for building schools and health care facilities. How much were they spending on repayment of debt from international loans? Those kinds of things were significant, so it was worth

doing, but it was a good place to put somebody who was new to economics as well as to the French language. That's all I'm going to say about that, Stu.

Q: No, I was just thinking, keeping the flag flying there and I guess probably it's paid off in the long run, but all these places, we made the decision very early on and whether you're having these little outposts if nothing else, it's great training for Foreign Service officers.

LESSER: It was that. Well, as you say in the long run it paid off. I'm sure you weren't applying a strict cost-benefit analysis there.

Q: No, but I'm just saying, by maintaining relations we went through various patches with these people.

LESSER: We're an astonishing country and our resources defy belief. The Soviet Union tried to keep up for all that time and they ended up collapsing, and nobody else has challenged to take that spot. Who knows if a united Europe will ever play that kind of a role. We're the wonder of the world and in some ways rightly so, I think. We handled it on the ground, day to day, I think we handled that sort of thing remarkably well without presuming to become the new colonial power. So, I would say it's a close question, but that it was historically the right thing to do.

Q: What about was Qadhafi messing around there?

LESSER: I'm trying to think. Qadhafi certainly had close relations in Upper Volta in the Burkina Faso era subsequent to that. I don't think Qadhafi was in power yet.

Q: Maybe not.

LESSER: '69 to '71.

Q: Yes. How about the Soviets, were they up to anything?

LESSER: They were active there, yes. They gave a little bit of aid and they did a little bit of spying. I don't think the Russian diplomats considered Ouagadougou a prize assignment. We had decent enough relations with their embassy, but they were pretty arm's length. That was sort of high cold war. We didn't carry it around on our shoulders, but you were always a little bit careful. We understood for example that on the rare occasions that we would invite a Soviet diplomat to a function that if you really wanted him to come, you had to invite two. Well, there was one guy who would come alone, but we knew what that meant also. You were a little wary and relations with the Soviets was more the DCM's and ambassador's job. Your humble economic-commercial officer met them when he met them, but I didn't entertain them.

Q: I take it you didn't have any high level visits while you were there?

LESSER: We had two high level visits that I can recall. One was Mayor Walter Washington the first elected mayor of Washington, DC. I actually left at the end of my tour on the same plane as he did. I stayed a couple of extra days in order to help out on the visit and that was very enjoyable. A wonderful man; he and his wife, Bennetta, were very good visitors. In addition, we actually had two congressional delegations come and that was extremely rare. One was led by I'm not going to remember his namfrom Texas, but four or five of them came out, and they wanted to look at development projects. One of them said if he'd realized it was so hot and dusty there and that we were going to a dam via an unpaved, washboard road he wouldn't have worn his store-bought suit. He was being funny, but he was also wondering what on earth he was doing in such a remote, god-forsaken place. The other one was Congressman Charles Diggs, who made a point of going to remote African countries. I know he had a mixed reputation for his own ethics, but he I would say he made a good impression on his visit. We didn't have any high level visits from administration figures that I can remember.

Q: This in Upper Volta was not on any sort of circuit of African Americans who wanted to go back to their roots and that sort of thing?

LESSER: No, it was too far inland to have been where the roots were and it was a little early for the roots movement also. Maybe in Ghana and Nigeria you would have gotten some of that, but not out in the boondocks of Upper Volta.

Q: How was the weather behaving while you were there?

LESSER: The weather was in the early stage of a massive drought which only got worse after I left. We were starting to ship in emergency food while I was there which was '70 to '71, and the drought lasted through '74 and killed tens of thousands of people and decimated the cattle - I don't want to use the word industry because it was far from being an industry, but it left the land even poorer than it had been.

Q: Well, I've talked to people who've dealt in the area and when you talk about cattle, you know, it sounds like, well, a lot of these cattle and they're like ranchers, but they're really not ranchers, aren't they? I mean these are a sign of wealth, so you, do you sell them all?

LESSER: Well, the people who had cattle were the Fulani people who in Upper Volta were called Peulh, and they trekked their cattle. They didn't own land, but they did own cattle and so they moved throughout the year and went to better pastureland according to what was available. They did sell cattle piecemeal to keep going, but it wasn't organized in an industrial way like ranches are.

Q: Well, then by '69 you're ready to go, wait a minute.

LESSER: '71.

Q: '71 I mean.

LESSER: '71 I'm ready to go and it's time to go back to Washington and having served for two years as an economic officer, it was time to learn a little economics. I was enrolled in the six month intensive economic course at FSI and learned what I suppose you could say I should have known before was included in the economic reporting position, but I don't think the course of history was particularly affected by my ignorance when I was in Ouagadougou.

Q: Well, there's some cracks in the whole system. Well, Larry, in the first place you were back in Washington from '71 to when?

LESSER: To '74.

Q: '74. Looking back on the six month economic course, this had quite a good reputation and was bringing new economic types up to almost a masters level, but looking back on it, did you find what was particularly useful that you picked up and what didn't?

LESSER: At the time I thought it was analogous to studying a language. That at the end of it I wasn't an economist, but I knew how to speak 'economist,' talk to economists, understand what they were saying and be able to do some processing of economic data myself. So, I found it opened up a whole world actually the way a new language would. I could understand things that made the world easier to interpret. I think macroeconomics was one big part of it and micro was also - supply and demand. It also gave me a greater appreciation of the economic system that we have, imperfect as it is and imperfectly as it functions, it is a damn good system and I could understand more of the mechanics of it. I went back out in the field with a much greater sense that I was doing something worth doing and that I was going to be confident to do it.

Q: After your six months, what did you do back in Washington?

LESSER: I was then assigned as economic officer for India on the India desk in the NEA bureau. We had two economic slots for India. However, the second slot - mine - was

abolished about less than six months after I occupied it and so I had to be reassigned. I then became the first and only economic officer for Bangladesh in the next-door office because Bangladesh had been part of Pakistan and it was in the office of Pakistan and Afghanistan affairs which now became Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh affairs. The U.S. was going to have an important place in a system of development of Bangladesh coming back from our having favored keeping Pakistan united before the Bangladeshis gained their independence. So, okay, Bangladesh gets independent and the U.S. becomes the country of last resort for humanitarian assistance immediately and development assistance a little further along and we needed an economic officer on the desk alongside the political officer for this new country. I was in the position before we diplomatically recognized Bangladesh. Out of that slot I became the first U.S. diplomat to visit the newly independent Bangladesh. I may be misremembering that, but I know I had some peculiar status when I made my orientation visit out there to an American office that had no official status of any kind - no longer a consulate in Pakistan and not yet an embassy, because we hadn't yet formally recognized independent Bangladesh. I stayed on the Bangladesh desk the rest of the time through mid-'74.

Q: Let's talk a bit about India first. I would imagine this would be a pretty fascinating place to take a look at, you know this huge country. What sort of things were you doing vis-#-vis, India?LESSER: You know, Stu, I said I may have been there for five or six months, it might have been less than that and I remember that for part of that time - about six weeks - I was moved to be the one and only officer covering Ceylon because the incumbent had a heart attack and was recovering at home. At that moment Ceylon decided to change it's name to Sri Lanka. I don't recall that I did anything of significance, vis-#-vis India during that short period.

Q: Well, India has survived nevertheless, despite a lack of concentration on your part.

LESSER: Yes, I neglected it, but India may have been better for it.

Q: Well, Bangladesh is no longer considered, but I must say people used to talk about Bangladesh as being the armpit of...

LESSER: A nicer term that the World Bank came up with is that they call it the largest, poorest country in the world. So, if Upper Volta was one of the poorest countries, well, yes, but it's not large. Bangladesh was hit both ways. It had the seventh largest population in the world and it was among the poorest.

Q: Taking a look at being the first person to really kind of look at it specifically, what were we seeing as our responsibility and what we can do?

LESSER: Well, we said over and over during that period that our interest was not strategic in the Bay of Bengal and in Bangladesh in particular, that we had a humanitarian interest. I think that was a fair way to put the priorities, although I think realistically you can't disassociate the development aid from the humanitarian aid for very long if you have a friendly relationship with the country and you're providing food to feed people. You've got to think about what you can do to improve their agricultural productivity so that they can feed themselves. Alternatively, that they can develop products for export and can generate revenue so they can buy the things that we're giving them. That is the way things evolve. We started with a strong humanitarian thrust that was fueled in part - the Bangladeshis believe that it was fueled entirely - by a kind of bloodguilt because we had not supported them in their just war of independence and we owed it to them, they would say and to some degree we would not argue the point. We owed it to them to be responsive to their needs and we could afford it. We sent in massive amounts of food aid in the first year of their independence.

Q: Were we looking for ways to make these people self-sufficient, you know the green revolution, the fancy rice, this sort of thing, or did you see this as being a solution?

LESSER: I couldn't really say with certainty. To the extent that it would be realistic to make themselves self-sufficient, we would want to do that, whether people analytically believe that was realistically possible anymore is another question. At the turn of the 20th Century, East Bengal in the Indian subcontinent was more than self-sufficient. It was a net food exporter. The population was a small fraction of what it became. Modern technology is a blessing and a curse. It doesn't work in a coordinated fashion and so life expectancy and infant survival moved ahead faster than food production and for that matter educational infrastructure and stuff like that. So, Bangladesh by the '60s was a country that was carrying a very large population while their productivity hadn't been able to keep step and they'd suffered from the period of independence after the formation of Pakistan as the neglected half economically of Pakistan. So, could Bangladesh be self-sufficient? I don't know. They're actually done a lot better in the last ten years than they were doing at the time I was there in the mid-'80s. But that gets ahead of our story. We're back in the early '70s.

Q: In the early '70s you really I mean this would seem like it would be a bottomless pit, didn't it?

LESSER: It looked like that might be the case, but look first they had just been through an extremely damaging war. Hundreds of bridges were destroyed. Bangladesh can't survive without bridges because it's all a delta country and so if you're going to build roads, they're going to be constantly crossing streams. (Of course, commerce also takes place by boat along the rivers.) The economy, which was in lousy shape to begin with, had been very severely disrupted. Large numbers of people had fled the country, including especially highly trained people. Furthermore, once the West Pakistanis left, well, that meant that a large number of the upper bureaucracy and the technocracy also left and thus the management class had been decimated. I mean there were plenty of Bangladeshis, but at best there were now half as many qualified people in there as there had been before. There was not a comparable inflow because the fact is relatively small numbers of

Bengalis had been in West Pakistan and large numbers of West Pakistanis had been in East Pakistan. During the time that I was on the desk, which was the first couple of years after independence, the thing was to stop the bleeding.

Q: Now, was India playing any role in this?

LESSER: India played a significant role. India made it possible for Bangladesh to succeed in breaking away from Pakistan and India. India tends to be somewhat imperialistic vis-#-vis Bangladesh and after all at some point the same forces that had made India and that had divided Indian in 1947 were going to come back into play. Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country and India, notwithstanding that it has more than 100 million Muslims, is a predominantly Hindu country. That's what defines those countries. That's what made them separate countries in '47, and in '71 when Bangladesh broke away India supported them for good political reasons to divide their enemy Pakistan. But once Bangladesh was independent a certain amount of difficulty was bound to creep back into the relationship. India was quite generous in many ways, but gradually less so as the relationship became more normal. So, they've got decent and correct relations and maybe closer than that, but they can't expect over the long term that India will make things much better for Bangladesh.

Q: Well, here's a new country that's developed, you know - I'm talking about the American bureaucratic side in NEA - and then you're over in the South Asian part of NEA. Was it a little hard to, I mean did you feel that you were the outcast of this NEA? Everything that has been pretty well, I mean it's really India and Pakistan and Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

LESSER: And Nepal.

Q: And Nepal, but I mean all of a sudden your group springs up. Did you all feel like the new boys on the block?

LESSER: Well, we were new boys, but we got our share of attention. The Bangladeshis, not surprisingly, were somewhat politically naive. They thought they could - you know it was Bhutto in Pakistan who said the American cow can be milked, and he wasn't politically naive, but you can say that and be naive. The Bangladeshis said, look you owe us and then they shrewdly said, look at all the aid you're giving us. You can't tell us that we're not important to you because if we weren't strategically important, you wouldn't be doing this. And we would tell them, no, no, we're doing it for humanitarian purposes and if you want to believe that some of it is because we feel badly that we didn't support you before, throw that in, but that's the reason; it's not strategic. Here's the danger of thinking that you're really important. You were the disaster country of 1971 and we ran to do something about it. There's going to be an earthquake in Central America one of these days. There's going to be massive flooding somewhere else. There's going to be ethnic conflict somewhere else which is closer to our strategic interest and we're going to shift our attention, we're going to shift it away from you. It's inevitable. So, why don't you consider while you've got our attention, show us some gratitude and make us want to stay to build in some institutionalization of this relationship? The father of independent Bangladesh, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, was a street politician, very successful in rallying people and inspiring them to achieve their independence, but he wasn't any good at understanding that kind of analysis of the politics of the world. He couldn't stop himself from berating us constantly and making it hard for the U.S. government to feel any more sympathetic than it did initially. So, whereas, Indira Gandhi and the Indian government kind of unnecessarily rubbed the American noses in it and made us angry, but okay, India is a world class power. Bangladesh was a country on its back, with no leverage on global affairs. My boss in Ouagadougou sometimes referred to Upper Volta as a beggar country and I had been a little offended by the sound of that. But if you take the insult out of that, as a strategy, some countries have to be beggar countries and they should behave like they appreciate it when you do something nice for them. In the early days the Bangladeshis weren't good at

that and indeed what was bound to happen, happened. They sort of faded from view and we started treating them like a regular country.

Q: By the time you got there, by the time you were doing this, were you able to sort of sharpen your economic teeth on the problem and all?

LESSER: You're a little concerned that I should really become a good economist with practice. I don't think that happened.

Q: I was just asking.

LESSER: I was dealing with economic policy matters and there's no clear dividing line between that and political policy matters, particularly in a country where our political interest was that Bangladesh not give us problems in the UN and not oppose us on world issues and economically that they not fall apart and become a failed state. The term wasn't in use yet, but we've seen since then that failed states are a real phenomenon and you can't simply ignore them. They have consequences for the countries that haven't failed, but I wasn't doing economic analysis. We had guys in AID who did that and the World Bank does it and the IMF does it and I was supposed to take economic considerations and factor them in and make sure they were factored in to our policies and our activities there.

Q: How about the Bangladeshi Embassy, brand new, did you find yourself spending quite a bit of time sort of guiding them around?

LESSER: Less than I thought I would. We knew the people at the Bangladesh Embassy. They had their own problems of just keeping body and soul together because they were clearly under-funded and you can't help suspecting... (I say this because my diplomatic style of speech has stayed with me in my years of retirement.) You can't help suspecting that they were making up the difference between what they were paid and what they needed to live by selling duty free goods and stuff like that and black market activities. If they didn't do that I would be surprised. We were not investigators. Their embassy

didn't have that strong an agenda. I remember very well that one day my main contact at the Bangladesh Embassy, their economic officer, told me, “We've got a problem. The Soviets have promised us grain, but it isn't going to reach for months and we've got an immediate crisis. We've been told by our capital that we have to ask the Americans to come and help us. The way we'd like you to do it is, we would like you to divert ships and bring in 100,000 tons of wheat and we'll repay it. The Soviets can then deliver wheat to where you would otherwise have gone instead of to us, that is to places that don't need it right away.” I said, “Well, have you talked to the Soviets about that?” He said, “Our relationship with the Soviets is very delicate. They've been extremely helpful to us.” (The Soviet Union supported Bangladesh independence when the U.S. didn't.) My Bangladeshi colleague said, “We don't want to ask them for stuff, we hope you'll work it out with them.” Oh yeah, great, we're still in the height of the Cold War, we're supposed to work out with the Soviets an arrangement that will help Bangladesh because the Bangladeshis are shy about approaching their Soviet benefactors. “I don't think that's a good strategy.” In effect, my Bangladeshi diplomatic colleague was saying, “Well, but you've got to do this because you have bloodguilt because you didn't support us when we needed it.” I told him, “I have a feeling that that's not going to carry the day on this one.”

I'll turn this into a lovely anecdote about life as a diplomat. It worked out that the Bangladesh Embassy was going to make a request to the State Department that we support them in rearranging the schedule for humanitarian deliveries of wheat, to provide it faster. This nice young man from the embassy said, “Any suggestions on how we handle it?” I said, “Well, your ambassador can ask for a meeting. He probably won't meet with the Secretary of State, but he'll meet with somebody high ranking. My suggestion is that you keep it to nuts and bolts as much as possible, i.e. here's what we need, here's the situation. And don't bring in the blood guilt business because it's not going to fly, but just show that you're going to be businesslike.” He said, “Thank you very much.” A few days later we got a request and the Secretary of State asked through his staff that Under Secretary for Economic Affairs William Casey (later the head of the CIA) receive the

Bangladesh ambassador. Casey's office sent a notice down to the desk saying he was going to be seeing the Bangladesh ambassador and give us a briefing paper. I wrote the briefing paper, saying he's going to be asking you for food aid and blah, blah. We can tell him this and don't tell him that. We sent that up to Casey's office. Then a couple of days later we get a notice saying, well, send your economic officer for Bangladesh up as note taker. Well that's me. So, I go up as note taker and the Bangladesh ambassador talks to the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs. The Bangladesh ambassador tells the Under Secretary what I told him to tell him, and the Under Secretary tells the Bangladesh ambassador what I told him to tell him, and we didn't actually need a note taker. Even more, Casey kind of nodded off during the meeting. There were just three people in the room, so I picked up and told the Bangladesh ambassador some of the talking points, while Casey caught a few winks. We didn't need the meeting at all. I could have written the whole thing up because I was the mover and shaker and indeed we did end up doing what they asked and it worked out fine. I thought this must be what it's like to be a real diplomat.Q: You left there when in '74?

LESSER: '74. Left the desk.

Q: “74. Where did you go?

LESSER: I went to Belgium.

Q: What were you doing in Belgium?

LESSER: I was assigned as economic officer in the embassy. Brussels had three ambassadors there, the ambassador to NATO, the ambassador to the European communities and the ambassador to the Belgians. That was mine, the bilateral embassy. This was a medium- to large-size embassy and I was responsible for a number of portfolios including several commodities most particularly energy. I covered nuclear industry and nuclear non-proliferation, which was a major issue. I covered economic co-production of the NATO F-16 fighter. Obviously that was a big project and there were non-

economic elements to it, but co-production was a big and sexy subject and I got that one. This and that, you know, you're always doing a few other things that just come along.

Q: You were doing this again from '74 to?

LESSER: From '74 to '77. Three years.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LESSER: The ambassador for almost all of the time there was Leonard K. Firestone, political appointee, former president of Firestone Tire and Rubber.Q: How interested was he in economic matters?

LESSER: He certainly didn't have any day-to-day interest in economic matters and he wasn't much more interested in political matters. He was an ambassador. He was a lovely man and of course a very wealthy one and he took a great interest in having things go well. He left the place an improved place. He was interested in morale of staff including the Belgian staff, but he was no scholar of Belgian affairs and Belgian politics, still less economics. Belgium of course was my first and only experience living in a developed country, but Belgium was a growing concern. We saw a lot of Ambassador Firestone. He was quite active, but he was a very modest man personally and he didn't pretend to know much about the substance of U.S. policy and U.S. interests there.

Q: I was wondering, in Belgium it's such a sophisticated state in a way, I mean they have been dealing with economic, I mean they've survived on commerce really.

LESSER: Yes.

Q: Did you find that, how did, how were we reacting with them?

LESSER: Well, the Belgians regarded good relations with the U.S. as being very, very important. They had their own parochial reasons for that. They had economic reasons

for it, too, of course because we're an important trading partner and a very important investor. Politically, they wanted to be good friends of the United States so that we would support their side in quarrels with France. The French were regarded as a problem by the Belgians, and they saw good relations with the Americans as part of the answer, I think. We had a natural community of interest. They liked to be very frank with us. They liked to be helpful to us internationally on those international issues which were not of vital concern to them, but like small countries they know that they can make themselves useful. So, working with the Belgians was generally speaking a very pleasurable thing.

Q: On nuclear matters, we were building nuclear things at that time, too, weren't we?

LESSER: We were, yes.

Q: So, I mean nuclear energy was seen as a solution to an energy problem, wasn't it?

LESSER: To some degree, yes and the Belgians thought so more than we do as Europeans I think continue to. They were strongly interested in advancing the development of their own nuclear power industry and they were also interested in developing nuclear waste for reprocessing facilities as a commercial possibility. They were interested in competing with France in those areas as well and wanted to show that they were a more trustworthy partner.

Q: In looking at the economy of Belgium at the time, did the division between Wallonia anFlanders show up in economic terms or not?

LESSER: In gross terms, yes. There was a sense in the country in the mid-'70s that the technological revolution was tilting the balance in favor of Flanders and against Wallonia, and Flanders was flourishing with new high tech industry and Wallonia was basically a region of coal mining and smoke stack industries. So relatively speaking the balance was shifting. I haven't followed it closely enough to know how significant that's been in the 20 years since.

Q: Well, I think it's still going on. I've talked to somebody who was just DCM there five years ago and saying that this continued. What were some of the major economic issues with the Belgians? Any?

LESSER: Of course there were. Oh, here's one I didn't even mention before. One of my areas was transportation and we had issues over scheduled and charter air flight routes and frequencies. In the three years I was there we had annual negotiations with the Belgians over bilateral air arrangements. The deal was essentially that the Belgians wanted to promote themselves to the extent possible as an entry point for tourism to Europe from North America. It makes perfect sense that if people come in to Brussels or Antwerp or Ostend - to an international airport in Belgium - then they'll spend some money there. They'll spend a night or two. They might go to Bruges, they might go to the Grand Place in Brussels, and if instead they come in to Paris or Amsterdam or London or Rome, they probably will never go to Belgium at all. So, their strategy was to make it as attractive as possible for American charter flights to land in Belgium. They were extremely generous in competing with other European countries to be the landing site. They also wanted the national airline Sabena (no longer in existence) to have as many points of entry to the United States as possible, but that gets negotiated on a basis of strict reciprocity. Pan Am and TWA, neither of which is still in business, were not interested in allowing them more access, because Belgium was after all a very small market for them. So, the negotiations were a kind of balancing act where they would think they offered a good deal in macro terms to the United States by being generous to the U.S. charters, and the American scheduled airline said, well, we don't care what you're doing for the charter carriers. We don't get anything for that. So, we're opposed; it's a bad deal. All three of our annual negotiations ended up in stalemate, which didn't provoke a crisis because unlike the baseball players and management, the Belgians understood that if they lose they still are better off playing under the old rules than they are provoking a crisis. They would really lose if they tried to battle it out. So, that was a nice bilateral issue. It was a real honest to God bilateral issue and I got to work on it.

Q: How about the French? Did you get involved with the French?

LESSER: On industrial co-production. The issue there was four NATO countries - Belgium, Holland, Norway and Denmark - were leaning towards jointly getting the same lightweight fighter plane to meet their NATO obligations. When I arrived in '74 there were several candidates. Two or three of them (three at first and then two) were American primary contractors, which complicated our role as American diplomats because there was no single American candidate that we could support. The other contenders were Sweden with the Viggen (even though Sweden wasn't a member of NATO), and France with a version of the Mirage which they were developing. France was not a very good member of NATO from the American perspective because they weren't in the unified command, but they were members in every other sense. They were legitimate candidates and they were putting a lot of pressure on Belgium to go for the French candidate, and pressure was widely believed to include under the table of payments. Anyway, this was the '70s and the law wasn't as clear as it is now on what was legitimate. We knew that the French were important competitors there and we knew that the Belgians would feel very much pulled in at least two directions. The Swedes would put their pressure on Norway with mixed results, and Denmark and Holland with probably less; those countries were going to go with an American plane unless the four-nation consortium fell apart. So, how were you going to influence the Belgians? Well, one way was by performance obviously; by convincing them that you had the best plane, you had the best lightweight fighter and could deliver it for the best money. You couldn't know that for certain because it wasn't in production yet. But, okay, we probably had the better of the argument there, especially when we came down to one candidate.

But the other thing that was going to swing in the balance was that, yes, it's going to cost us a lot of money, but it wouldn't cost us as much and we would get side benefits in technological know-how in addition to cost if we were producing some of the parts for the plane. So there was this massive unprecedented negotiation from the primary contractors

and the secondary contractors to license Belgium and the other countries to produce important parts of the chosen plane in their own countries. The primary contractor is the one who makes the airframe, but the ones who make the engines and the numerous ones who make the electronics also are in this game. The question is how much can you promise the ones who buy it will also be producing part of it, will be benefitting from being on the technological cutting edge and of course, will create jobs and reduce the foreign exchange loss. That was a very complex thing and it was being discussed on many different levels. I was the point man for that vis-#-vis the Belgians. It was ultimately successful for the Americans.

Q: It ended up with the F-16 didn't it?

LESSER: Yes. General Dynamics became the primary contractor.

Q: General Dynamics. How did you find they worked with you?

LESSER: They were careful about how they dealt with us and again one can suspect that, for one thing I think as a matter of general faith big business is leery of getting too close to embassies. Okay, they know what they know and they're probably right. We're leaky. We have an agenda, which isn't always in their interest, and so they're a little careful there. They don't tell us everything and a more subtle concern is they may be doing things that they think it's in our interest that we not know about. This is on the question of how they induce local officials to support them. It was universally believed, but maybe more than the facts warranted, that there was funny business going on.

Q: On all sides.

LESSER: We were generally protected from that. Actually I did have a glimpse of it at one point. A representative of one of the American contenders came to my office. (Keep in mind that I'm not very senior. I'm not even the section chief.) He wants me to look at a document that shows that one of our rivals, the French, are using improper means

to press Belgian decision-makers to decide in favor of the French plane. He said, “Do what you like with it. I'm leaving it here with you.” So, very excited, I went to my boss and she went with me to the DCM, her boss, and I said, “Look what I've got. This is real evidence that our French rivals are cheating, and what are we going to do with it? How are we going to report it?” After a discussion, he said, “Well, we're not going to report it. It's up to the American company that showed you the document, not us. They'll know what they need to do to get this information out. They'll figure it out, and Larry, you can enjoy knowing the story before it hits the press, but it's not going to hit it out of here.” Indeed it was a matter of a couple of weeks and the story hit and it was a scandal. It did damage to French chances and it was developed by detective work by one of their competitors whose fingerprints weren't visible at the time that the story got out, and it didn't happen through U.S. government sources. I guess they found journalistic sources, which is the natural way to go.

Q: Did you get involved with relations with other missions?

LESSER: On energy matters particularly, I did because the international energy agency was established during that period. It was based in Brussels. A Belgian viscount, Etienne Davignon, was the first secretary general of it and so I worked fairly closely with my counterpart at the USEC mission on energy matters, and a little bit with the NATO mission. Of course, Ken Brown [now President of ADST] was in the embassy in Brussels at the same time in the political section.

Q: There was a European community when you were there?

LESSER: Yes, European communities.

Q: Communities. Were you looking at this at that time as being a potential for really getting together in what became the European Union or did you see too many centrifugal forces?LESSER: It wasn't my business to have an opinion on that, but occasionally you'd hear from the Belgians on related subjects. During one discussion with a Belgian

foreign ministry guy, he said, well, we're going to support you on this, blah - I don't even remember what the issue was because what I remember was he said, "You should understand, Mr. Lesser, that we Belgians are the best Europeans." I knew in the context what he meant was best Europeans in the sense of a unified Europe. "We Belgians are the best Europeans... with the possible exception of the Irish." At that I had to laugh because they're the best Europeans for the same reason as the Irish are the best Europeans. They're good Europeans as a defense from the French. The Irish are good Europeans as a defense from the British and this was this was something you always had to remember in talking to the Belgians about European issues.

Q: It's interesting in looking at the situation that so often it was France. Was it that Germany was playing and keeping quiet and in a fairly modest role or letting the French carry the water?

LESSER: Well, certainly Belgium doesn't have a soft spot in its heart for Germany, but they don't worry culturally about Germany. When we talked earlier about the Walloons and the Flemings, the underlying point is that Walloons speak French and although they're not culturally French, they're culturally deeply influenced by France, and the Flemings aren't. The Flemish are not culturally influenced to the same degree by the Dutch (I think) although their language is Dutch. They're themselves. And there is a very small German speaking population in a little corner of Belgium, but it's not politically important. So, Germany is not an important factor in that the best I can tell. Ken Brown or somebody else who was doing Belgian internal politics might put another spin on that, but that was the impression I came away with.

Q: Was anyone looking at sort of the economic American circles? Was anybody saying you know, if the European communities developing the prognosis where they're going and all, we're kind of big trouble down the road in the next 20 or 30 years or so as a rival to the United States?

LESSER: Well, why would that be trouble, Stu?

Q: Well, as an economic rival, you know.

LESSER: Well, look, here we are in 2002, in a unipolar world with the Untied States unrivaled as an economic power and is it good, is it bad, would we be better off?

Q: In the '70s, the prognosis was not necessarily the United States was going to be at this economic peak where we are now and all. You know, there would be other countries that would come up and the Japanese are beginning to look pretty fancy and other ones. I was just wondering.

LESSER: It was U.S. policy to support much greater unity in Europe and that was the view by people who understood that you could succeed beyond your wishes and that you could be creating a monster in effect and we supported it throughout. Essentially I think the underlying idea there was it's easier dealing with self-assured, self-reliant partners even though inevitably we're gong to have points of conflict. We'd still prefer that to a Europe which is unstable and poor and is a never-ending source of trouble and can't keep its own house in order. I think that remains.

Q: Yes. Oh, I agree with you. Well, you left there in 1977?

LESSER: I did.

Q: Okay, well, we'll pick this up the next time whither in '77?

LESSER: Then I went to Rwanda. I went from Belgium to an old ex-Belgian rural country.

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Today is September 14, 2002, Larry you were in Rwanda from 1977 to when?

LESSER: To '79.

Q: Put me in since, Rwanda and Burundi, which is below and which is above?

LESSER: Rwanda is the northern one which borders on Uganda; both of course are landlocked and, interestingly, both are don't have any railroads. Commercially, Burundi could only be reached by going overland, by truck, or by rail and truck through three other countries. If your goods landed in Kenya, they went through Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda before reaching Burundi. Okay, it only needed to go through two to get to landlocked Rwanda, but this is the very definition of remote. Rwanda is the more mountainous of the two and so it's remote and in addition it's kind of difficult to get around the country. It's called the land of a thousand hills, and the land of eternal spring, which is also the name of the luxury hotel in Kigali, the capital, and that means that road building is extremely complicating. It also means that if people, the people are often referred to by outsiders as being kind of mountaineers, like West Virginians in our own country, with a kind of close, not easy to get to know, personality, but what's even more striking is that there are no major population centers. The society is organized by hillsides and even on the hillsides they don't join together, but families have their own compounds and they farm there as best they can. Very difficult kind of farming because the land is all up and down. These are not just a thousand hills; they are really extremely steep. It's a very beautiful place, but a place that would be a developer's nightmare, whether you're talking about economic development or real estate development or developing population centers. It means that even at the time I was there they were very few markets. I'm talking about traditional markets where people trade, you know, fruits and vegetables, foodstuffs, beans - which is the staple there. So, this was in those literal senses a remote and backwards country. That doesn't mean necessarily that the people were out of touch with the rest of the world, although this was the late '70s. There was no Internet. They were out of touch, but they were not unsophisticated people. I guess for the final background point, the question of the ethnic makeup of the people. Almost everybody is Hutu or Tutsi with conventional

numbers that Hutu are 85% of the population, Tutsi 15% in Rwanda and this is pretty well known now, but at the time almost nobody knew the difference between Rwanda and Burundi. Rwanda and Burundi had the same ethnic makeup: 85% Hutu, 15% Tutsi. Traditionally the Tutsis were landowners and cattle raisers and the Hutu were cultivators and laborers and more of them in a serf-like status, relative to the Tutsi minority. After independence around the late '60s Burundi stayed fixed in the traditional relationship so that Tutsis comprised all of the ruling class and all of the military officers and almost all of the military and ran the country. There was a not bloodless but a relatively neat revolution in Rwanda. The Hutu came to power and put into power a regime, which was not highly repressive to the Tutsi minority - the former elites - but was somewhat discriminatory. The first civilian government was corrupt and incompetent and fell, and when I got there in '77 the country was being run with a relatively light hand by a military government lead by the senior military officer, General Juvenal Habyarimana, the same leader who was killed or who died in an airplane accident, sorry, an airplane sabotage that precipitated the terrible events in the '90s. At the time I was there our impression was that Habyarimana and his government was relatively progressive, relatively humane and relatively clean. Fifteen years later undoubtedly that was no longer the case. The old idea that power corrupts would be proven out once again. (End of tape)

Okay, the people in Rwanda were not subjugated, but the basic point was that there was nothing going on there that was relevant to the rest of the world. Subsistence farming is a very noble occupation, but by definition it stays in place, it doesn't extend its influence. There were no, very little that was grown was commercialized. There was very little travel through Rwanda and there was very little international commerce between Rwanda and the outside except if they were to modernize at all, since they couldn't produce industrial goods themselves, they had to bring them in from the outside and so had to figure out some way to pay for it. Those were the most interesting kinds of issues there.

Q: In the first place, let's talk a bit about the embassy. Who was the ambassador and the background of the ambassador and what were you doing?

LESSER: The ambassador was Frank Crigler, a career Foreign Service officer, naturally in his first embassy (it was a very small embassy, a good place to learn the skills). The embassy was located in a little storefront type of building; a single story building which didn't extend very far. The tradition was that it had formerly been a butcher store. That was actually not true, it was the building around the corner that was the butcher store, but since there were some rather large hooks on the wall, it was fun to be able to tell people that was where the meat was hung. It was - I already told you this in connection with serving in Ouagadougou - the answer to the question well, what are the American interests to justify having a full embassy. It was U.S. policy set in the Kennedy administration that there would be an embassy in all of the newly independent countries. This was consistent with that policy, but it was for the time a minimum embassy with only four or five officers including an admin officer, two or three or four staff people, two secretaries and two communicators; you can't do it with less, in a way. The only other agency that was present was USIS and even they abandoned the post and left their position unmanned, they left the American library so we ran it with one or two Foreign Service Nationals who were paid by USIA Washington. There was no American officer there to supervise and no other American government presence at all.

Q: No Peace Corps, no AID?LESSER: No, well, the Peace Corps is an interesting case because we actually had Peace Corps volunteers. They were serving mostly as teachers at the little university, which was located several hours away by car, but there was no Peace Corps office or staff in Rwanda. The volunteers were nominally supported by Peace Corps Zaire, but it was at that time and I think remains, extremely difficult to travel internally between these African countries. So, for these purposes Zaire would have to be called remote, too because it's own infrastructure was breaking down. As a matter of practical sense there was no real support available from Peace Corps Zaire, which had

problems of its own anyway. These Peace Corps volunteers worked pretty autonomously. I should mention there was an AID affairs officer and he had a small program there and that was it. Let me mention because this fits right in with the question of what was our mission there. When I first arrived Frank Crigler had been, I was the deputy chief of mission, but it was pretty nominal to call me DCM because if we have an ambassador and a DCM what else are we supervising? Well, we had a political officer and we had a consular officer and we had an admin officer and that was the whole story. When I first arrived Crigler had been there for some time, close to a year and he asked me - I just came from DCM training here at FSI, a wonderful course - he asked me as we were making our "psychological contract," what do I think my work requirements should be. I went through a couple of things that were kind of standard and I said I'm real interested in economic affairs and I'm interested in development affairs. I'd be very glad to be the coordinator with the AID program. Until that point, Ambassador Crigler was sort of going along with me saying, okay, fine, blah. He suddenly looked up and took issue with me and said well, wait a minute here, if you're going to coordinate the AID program, then there's nothing left for me to do because AID is the only thing we're got going here and I'm going to tell you right now, Larry, that's mine. Point taken.

Q: During the two years you were there, what were you doing?

LESSER: You know, I was afraid you were going to ask that question. You know, the traditional definition of what DCMs do is that they're the inside people and the ambassador is the outside person and also secondarily you're the ambassador's alter ego, which means you're ready to do all the outside stuff and you're in circulation enough so that you can step in. Day to day you're the one who is supervising the operation in-house. Okay, there's a lot to do supervising. We had two very good admin officers; that is the first one and then his successor. (We've never had two at the same time, but admin was a very difficult thing to do.) We were at the end of the supply line, we're in a country where cars break down all the time and you never know where and so you're constantly - it's always difficult to move people or goods around. It's always difficult to keep body and soul

together. You need generators to be sure that you're going to have electricity. You need to keep your supply lines open. But quite frankly I didn't know much about those things and the admin officer I was supervising did and for the most part those things ran pretty well. All I can tell you, Stu, is that we were very busy all the time.

I'll give you an illustration of one of an intellectual conflict, philosophical conflict, that I had with Frank Crigler, my boss; a man just a few years older than I am and with a lot of similar interests, kind of an athletic guy and a guy who enjoyed getting out and meeting people and liked vigorous debate, etc. and was very hardworking, an ambitious guy. He said, I'm gong to give you some assignments to do and that's what your highest priority is. One of the projects, and it was a very successful one, was that we would send a monthly report to Washington on a subject of our choice. These were theme reports, not a “weeka,” not a summary of the month in Rwanda, so we did a report on the role of the military in Rwanda. We did a report on the role of the French or the Belgians because the colonial power, kind of post-colonial because they had been under a League of Nations mandate. They didn't rule Rwanda the way they did the Belgian Congo.

We did a report on agriculture. We did a report on higher education, or unemployment. We did a report on ethnic differences. On that by the way it was our feeling and I believe a lot of local observers would agree with this that for an outside observer, if you were Jonathan Swift, as Gulliver, and you were looking at the Liliputians ... this isn't very, I wish I was more subtle: there's no difference between Hutus and Tutsis. They look alike. They speak the same language. They have the same religion. They have the same names. They work in the same businesses especially in Kigali, the capital way there off the hillside so you can't tell who's a landowner or cattle raiser and who is a bean planter. They intermarry, so the distinction if they started as purely one or the other, that distinction disappeared. And they aren't identified with any particular area. They always were in a feudal kind of arrangement. They were not in the traditional tribal arrangement typical of most of Africa. Hutus and Tutsis are to all intents and purposes the same people and our working assumption at the time was that they were coming to know that and had succeeded at

a very important social task, where Burundi - with the same ethnic mixture and a similar history - had not succeeded. Burundi was a seething place where more interethnic trouble was anticipated.

We did monthly reports. Martin Brennan, who is now our ambassador in Zambia and just finished as ambassador to Uganda, was the political officer and he and I jointly worked on most of those reports and we jointly got nominated for the director general's reporting award. We had plenty of what the traditional Foreign Service likes to call substantive work to do since we were there and without reference to the question, well, why does the U.S. government need to do these things, because once you're doing them, they're fascinating and they're very worthwhile in themselves. They're as much like an academic exercise as they are an exercise in pursuit of our national interests.

Oh, I'm sorry, to finish where I started. Frank Crigler, said so I'm going to give you assignments, that's your highest priority and I would say and here's the philosophical difference, I said, well, what about answering the phone and opening the mail and you know, getting the car that fell off the road back on the road. He said, well, we'll take care of that of course, but when I set a deadline for the report, you'll have to, I intend for that deadline to be met. I would say, well, keeping body and soul together in this storefront embassy sometimes will overwhelm these kinds of discretionary reports. We don't always have the same amount of discretionary time. We worked it out. We did all the reporting. Occasionally we did miss an internally imposed deadline. We never had Washington saying where's your report on the role of the church in Rwanda.

Q: How about, what was the role of the Belgians and French? I mean was this one of these places where we kind of kept to one side and said that this was your baby and it still is your baby?

LESSER: To a considerable degree the answer to that is yes. If you show the degree of your interest by how much resources - mostly it can be converted to money terms -

you're prepared to put into a place, then clearly we left it to the Europeans to take the lead and the Europeans meant mostly the Belgians and the French, but it also meant the EC which brings the Germans into it and Germany had a hand in Rwanda before World War I. The League of Nations mandate took Rwanda and the territory of Ruanda-Urundi at that time from Germany and turned them over to Belgium. So, the Europeans had the primary interest and the primary external cultural influence and we were more than content for them to do that. We didn't have any strategic interests there and we've got plenty of places to pour our resources, so that is definitely the case. However, the Cold War was still on at that time and the U.S. to the extent it had discreet interests they were of a political nature and a humanitarian interest in contributing to development and to reaching at least a subsistence level for the hard-pressed Rwandan people. That role wasn't very hard for us to play and it was valued by the Rwandans because they also wanted to use us to some extent as a window on the world and a little bit of an alternative to the colonial powers from Europe.

Q: Did you get involved with gorillas there?

LESSER: Mountain gorillas.Q: Yes, mountain gorillas.

LESSER: Yes, not guerrilla fighters. Yes, Diane Fossey was, actually when I said, when Frank Crigler said that AID was the only thing we had going there, actually we had two things going and I believe he told me the other one as well. That was Diane Fossey and National Geographic, the project in the Volcanoes National Park at Karisoke Camp in the Virunga mountains, tracking and defending the 200 or so mountain guerrillas in the world, and that was indeed the most glamorous thing imaginable. It was a marvelous thing going on. By the nature of it, unlike game parks in the African veldt, the guerrillas were inaccessible. They lived high up on these volcanic mountains and the mountains were almost constantly being rained on, so they were mud mountains, mud and thick sometimes jungly forest, very steep hills. And mountain gorillas are not show animals. They don't come out and play for you. They're shy and can be threatening when they're approached

too abruptly unless they've been habituated, that was the term we used, habituated to people coming by. Even then you have to do it according to the rules, according to the ways that Diane Fossey and other researchers developed. In light of that it was a rare privilege for members of the mission to have an opportunity to go out and actually see the gorillas in their place, and to my everlasting gratitude. Frank Crigler was kind of the gatekeeper with Diane Fossey. He made it possible for me and my family, including my children who were then 10 and 12 years old respectively, to visit there and to sit among one of the groups of mountain gorillas one time. That was a highlight.

Q: Was it sort of I would imagine that Diane Fossey would be a difficult person to deal with. I mean very protective, I mean it was unfortunate she was killed, but just by the very nature of what she was doing, meant she really had to make sure that people didn't mess around on her turf.

LESSER: That's right. Well, she had a kind of monomania. She knew that about herself and she had a good sense of humor, so she made jokes about herself and about how difficult she was. She also used questionable methods for defending the gorillas particularly from poachers. There's a third ethnic group in Rwanda the Twa, who number less than 1% of the people. They're pygmy-like people and they're more backward. They don't have schools. They don't have any; they haven't come into the modern world the way the more sophisticated Hutus and Tutsis had. Some lived by poaching and to some extent by poaching gorillas. You can eat gorilla meat. (I guess you can eat human meat, too, right?) But the reason for poaching them was because there was a market in Europe and Asia for their heads, hands and feet and people would pay high prices. Occasionally, a gorilla would be killed and you would find a body, but missing those parts. Diane had, let us say, had her own methods for dealing with poachers. Then of course, she lived there. Poachers aren't people who come in for the weekend. They're people from the area, so if you develop a network, it's sort of like police work, you work out arrangements and so the poachers, it's okay for them to kill deer in the woods, but they'd better stay away from gorillas. Some of the traps they set aren't, don't discriminate, so they would

catch gorillas in these traps which were rather ingeniously put together traps with strings that are triggered by walking through a particular place and it would catch whatever animal happened to go into that. Sometimes the animals were severely wounded, but not killed. Anyway, Diane had her ways. She was a difficult person. She knew that. She was also physically not in good condition in those days. She had no doubt the beginnings of emphysema. She drank heavily. She had an incorrectly healed couple of broken ribs that kept her in almost constant pain. Her endurance was not high. She actually, this was sort of the dirty little secret at Karisoke, she very seldom saw gorillas. The graduate students who were working there with her were the ones who actually went out and observed the gorillas most of the time. The gorillas make two nests a day and so they circulate through a fairly extensive range and occasionally they would be very close to the camp and those times she would go out and see them. There were only two habituated groups at that time and so there were only two groups that were being regularly observed.

Q: Were there any pressures while you were there by the neighbors? I'm thinking of Uganda or Tanzania? What are some of the other places?

LESSER: Well, Zaire and Burundi.

Q: Zaire and Burundi.

LESSER: Well, Uganda was under Idi Amin's rule at that time. I'll tell you quickly we had closed our embassy so Uganda was off limits and was unsafe. I had at that time a secretary (as I said there were two secretaries in the embassy). She was a very competent, very intelligent woman who had had a Canadian businessman boyfriend who was operating through the area, and that included Uganda. Not long before I arrived at post he disappeared in Uganda and it was understood that he had been taken and held imprisoned by Idi Amin's security people. My secretary was very concerned and wanted us to do whatever we could on a humanitarian basis to try to get him liberated. Now this is extremely complicated because there was no acknowledgment that he was even in

Uganda, no acknowledgment by the Ugandans. We had no diplomatic communication with them except directly through the - I can't remember now who had charge of the U.S. interests; it might have been the Swiss, who would be more than happy to pass messages, but we didn't ask the Ugandans for favors diplomatically. Furthermore, he wasn't an American, furthermore, he didn't have any formal relationship, and one final furthermore, the boyfriend was actually legally married to somebody else who was also not American. You ask, what did we do there? Well, this wasn't official, it was in a way off the books, but I felt that we ought to try to do something and we did, but it wasn't very much of a something. We sent a message to our interests section in Kampala asking if they could make inquiries and express some interest in trying to locate this man. It was unavailing. We didn't get a response. There were reports from time to time that people knew what had happened to him, but some of those were extremely suspect from people who, you had an idea that they were working a scam, they were trying to get our secretary to pay money for information to kind of spring him and that the money would disappear and nothing more would occur. It was a very sinister situation and we did eventually come to believe, but I don't think we ever got definitive proof that he died under imprisonment and torture in Uganda and that was the end of that story. So, Uganda was kind of a black hole from the standpoint of our embassy in Rwanda.

There were uneasy relations with Burundi because of the odd historical circumstances that in Burundi the Tutsis were in charge and in Rwanda the Hutus were now in charge; uneasy relations, but no serious problems. We were at the extreme eastern edge of Zaire, which is after all if you look at the map, an enormous presence in that part of the world, but the map is misleading because Zaire was breaking down. It wasn't a nation in many respects and there was practically no communication between Eastern Zaire and the center in Kinshasa. Bukavu was the most important city there and it ran as if it was in a country of its own, and of course not a very wealthy one. The border with Tanzania was in a relatively unpopulated part of Tanzania and so there was no very close relationship there either. So, Rwanda is remote and isolated even within its region.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Rwandan government?

LESSER: I loved dealing with the Rwandan government. Mountaineers they may be, but I'll pat myself on the back a little bit here and Frank Crigler and Martin Brennan can do it, too. We were all kind of outgoing. To people in a lot of the Third World, Americans come across as different from Europeans. We are much less buttoned up. I venture to say we're more fun to talk to. We give them a straighter story. We have less of a, we don't come with a point of view in nearly the same way that the Europeans do. We had I would say excellent contacts up and down through the Rwandan government which included at the top the military, and the Rwandan bureaucracy, small as it might be. You know, it did include a lot of people who were educated in Europe and they were intellectually certainly a good match for us. I found that for the most part it was a lot of fun and it was very interesting talking to them. I'll give you one counter example, however, and that is we had no military attache of course, but in our role as representing the whole U.S. government, the embassy would get occasional requests from the Defense Department to do the kind of reporting that attaches do. So, now I can't remember the term, oh, the order of battle, a technical term, and I couldn't even give you a good definition for it.

Q: Well, who reports to who, I mean, it's in other words how the military is organized.

LESSER: Okay, thank you very much, Mr. Stu Kennedy. We got a request that we give a report on the order of battle of the Rwandan army. (There is no navy, it's a landlocked country, and there's no air force because they can't afford to have an air force.) So, I went to the chief of staff of the Rwandan army, a colonel and he already knew me and I said, “I've been asked to ask you some questions about the order of battle so that we can report back. This is routine reporting that we're asked to do in countries all around the world.” He said, “Why are you asking me? Why don't you just take it from your satellites?” It occurred to me to say, but it would have been insulting, it's not interesting enough for us to focus our satellites on Rwanda. As a matter of fact it isn't the kind of information you can get from satellites. He said, “I don't think I can give you that information.” We had a very nice

conversation, but I didn't have very much to report back because there was this sense that if we wanted to know it then there must be some importance to it and therefore, he shouldn't tell us unless he was getting something for it, unless he knew what the whole deal was, and he didn't. The American point of view is transparency, maximum, you can read all of this information, it's freely available from us about us. We'd be more than happy to give it all to you and if we don't get it from you it's not going to make any difference either, but it means it's going to be a little blank spot in some briefing book and that's that. From the Rwandan perspective, though, there was a kind of suspicion. What do the Americans want to know it for? The Rwandans don't understand the whole system and so they kind of shut down and say I'm sorry, I can't do that for you. I once asked that same military officer for a personal favor. I said I'm a long distance runner. This isn't an easy place for a long distance runner because of all the hills and I don't like to run on roads and you can't run in the bush because you'll break your ankle, but you have a track at your military cantonment, could I train there? He said, no, I could never explain that to other people. Then, what would I tell the Russians? So, I didn't go running very much when I was at Kigali because I could understand it from his point of view.

Q: Were the Libyans or the Soviets messing around there at all?

LESSER: Well, you know, Stu, the Libyans weren't there. That was before they were projected much, at least by my recollection. There were only six or eight full embassies in Kigali. The North Koreans had one and they built an athletic facility, a big building that reminded you that they were there. The Chinese built a very fine road, one of the very few paved roads in Rwanda. It was so beautifully graded that Frank Crigler used to say that this is the only road in the world that no matter which direction you rode on it, you were always going downhill. It did actually give that feeling. It was a wonderful road. So, there was a tiny, tiny, little bit of Cold War competition going on there for Rwandan votes on key issues. I don't recall that it was an ongoing thing. My predecessor as DCM told me that he had been spat on by his North Korean counterpart and I'm sure that must have happened,

but that's more exciting than anything that happened to me while I was there, vis-#-vis the representatives of the communist countries.

Q: Well, then by '79 I guess you were ready to get out?

LESSER: Time to move on. It was time to go back to Washington. I had had two overseas tours in a row, Belgium and Rwanda, been out for five years, and I was assigned to the office of the director general in the bureau of personnel - now human resources. The Director General was Harry Barnes. I was assigned to a little staff that reported directly to the DG called policy and planning, something like that, and that's where I was for the next two years, '79 to '81.

Q: In the first place, how did Harry Barnes seem to run his job, do his job?

LESSER: You may be asking that because you've heard other things or indeed you may have even interviewed him for this project.

Q: No, I mean, it's just a generic question.

LESSER: I think the world of Harry Barnes. He's a very soft-spoken man who talks rapidly because you have to in order to keep up with all of the thoughts that are going through his head. He's constantly sparking new ideas. A lot of them are ideas that aren't going anywhere, but they also include a lot of wonderful ideas that are worth following up on and he did follow up on. He's tall, but otherwise very unprepossessing; a kind of a sloppy dresser and he almost mumbles and his handwriting is even worse. It was a joke around there that people couldn't read what he wrote. I never found it much of a problem; I could read it. I pride myself on that, but I found it was a privilege and it was fascinating to be in his presence because he was such a decent fellow, so straightforward, so open to ideas, he was an excellent listener and he was a very supportive boss. The downside to that is that he didn't project the image of a strong leader and so a lot of people underestimated him or worse, openly defied him or went against him and some of his initiatives didn't fly.

There was another reason for that, however, an additional reason, because all of what I said did figure in, but the director general as I came to understand is the senior career position, the defender of the career Foreign Service, although he's also the director of personnel so he's in charge of Civil Service as well. I don't mean to slight at all the legitimate interests of the very large Civil Service in the State Department or to ignore the fact that there are cultural differences and conflicts between Foreign Service and Civil Service. But there isn't any other defender for the Foreign Service, and the Civil Service has a lot of resources outside of the director general and outside of the Department. So, he's the one who interfaces at the political level. He reports to the under secretary for management who at that time was Ben Reid, and that person in turn reports to the deputy secretary and the Secretary of State so that a good part of his job is shaping issues in the two directions. Taking direction from the political level and giving to them the particular perspective of the career Foreign Service. That isn't well understood by politicians who are accustomed to domestic politics. Harry Barnes did that as skillfully as he could. He didn't win all his battles and when he lost that was keenly resented by the career Foreign Service, but from closer up you could see that he was maybe getting the best result that was possible out of a difficult situation. We had two major situations if I could get into the policies that we worked on?

Q: Yes.

LESSER: One is the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which was passed during the time I was working for Harry Barnes. I had nothing to do with the Act itself. I came into that office too late to get heavily involved there. I was involved in some of the implementing provisions particularly in the allowances area and I don't particularly, I don't, since I'm really on a roll here and I find that there's plenty more that I want to talk about. I don't find my allowances work to be all that interesting, but I was very active on danger pay and hardship allowance, and they did take a new shape under the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

My other major issue was a great injury to the State Department, and that was the transfer of the commercial function from State to Commerce and the establishment of the Foreign Commercial Service. That decision had already been made before I came into the office, but I was given responsibility from the personnel standpoint of working out the practical arrangements. There was an executive order from Jimmy Carter that ordered that the function be changed. The terms of the executive order said it was to be done with no net increase in resources devoted to commercial affairs and that the State Department was to transfer the resources that it used for trade promotion and commercial affairs to the Commerce Department and they were to establish the Foreign Commercial Service out of that. That may sound like a sound approach, but it didn't seem like that to me and it didn't seem like that to us. Furthermore, Commerce had already decided that it was only going to put commercial attaches in countries of major commercial interests and so we also had to figure out, well, how were you going to cover trade promotion in other countries. In the end FCS established their own offices in 65 countries and that left a hundred and something countries where we had representation, where State still had the responsibility of trade promotion. We had to work out what the rules were and how you would get resources, but more fundamentally and initially, what resources were actually going to get transferred. As it turned out, we transferred I don't remember the numbers anymore, but a very substantial number of Foreign Service positions. These were positions, not people, that were transferred: the authority to establish positions. They were transferred from State to Commerce, plus an additional number of support positions and an additional and very large number of Foreign Service National positions because there were more nationals working in our commercial sections overseas than American officers. We had to work out what the standards would be for deciding how many positions there were. That was not a pleasant job. It was one that fell to Harry Barnes in the director general's office. The bureau of economic and business affairs, EB, had only a few years before added business to its name, but that wasn't good enough to hold onto the function. EB had a good bit of the responsibility for demonstrating that State was competent to take care of trade promotion, but once the battle was lost, they became kind of truculent and

uncooperative and left it only to personnel. EB just sniped from the sidelines and said we were giving away the store.

I was witness to a very unpleasant encounter between Harry Barnes and Deane Hinton who was the Assistant Secretary for EB at the time, where I thought Hinton was way out of bounds in telling Barnes what he thought of the job we were doing. I think we did a very good job. I think we saved what could be saved. I mean the president had made the decision and had imposed the rules. We ended up with a memorandum of understanding between State and Commerce on how the thing was to be done and we also drew a line under it and said after the initial turnover of resources, that the evolution, further evolution would have to be independent. Commerce came at us saying, well, when our interests grow, we'll come back and you'll turn over more resources to us and we said, no, you've got to go to OMB like everybody else. You'll become a normal agency and you have to establish things on your own basis. I think we came away with as good an arrangement as could be worked out. There were inherent flaws. You can't do it by that kind of exchange of resources. A great many State people were invited to join the Foreign Commercial Service and did and a few didn't and went into conventional economic work. The overwhelming majority of Foreign Service Nationals who had been working on commercial affairs also switched over. So, it happened and I think that once the decision was made, it was carried out with as little disruption to U.S. interests as could be.

Q: Well, you weren't there at the time, but what were you hearing, what had been the initiative for getting this? Had this, for making this change?

LESSER: Well, as I understood it, there was dissatisfaction on the Hill for many, many years. This is analogous after all to the Foreign Agricultural Service. Until the '20s agricultural attache work was done by State people also, there was no separate service in agriculture and so there had been at least some kind of a disruption. It followed a different course politically at that time, but there was a precedent for it. There was very great dissatisfaction from the American business community that State people didn't

give them much support. From their perspective this was understandable because the Department of State representatives overseas are the ones who interpret the points of view of other countries back home and so if the steel industry or the airline industry says, we're having a problem, help us, State people may say, well, that's not going to be as easy as it looks because they have a very clear basis for their problem and we can't just apply force majeure and get our way.

Q: You were saying within the Foreign Service, the Commercial Section?

LESSER: The commercial function got short shrift relative to the economic function. The fast road to promotions is to be a traditional economic officer, do economic reporting and analysis and not trade promotion. It was considered the stepchild. So, even within State, there was lip service to our devotion to trade promotion, but you would find that when resource decisions were being made and when assignments were being made that preference was almost always given to economic work and people who were nominally commercial officers were sometimes pulled off to do economic work on oil matters, on airline negotiations, on industrial co-production of the F-16 which I mentioned in connection with my work in Belgium. So, there was something to the idea that if you gave a separate status and a separate organizational structure to commercial work that maybe they could be more effective.

Q: Was there any feeling on the part of people weighing this, the Department of Commerce is sort of renowned within the government for being, I don't want to be too harsh, but being sort of the dumping ground of a lot of political appointees at the top. There's a lot of turmoil within the Department of Commerce. I'm not talking about the professionals there, but they get more than their share of political appointees of less than major caliber.

LESSER: You know, I'm not sure what to say about that. I didn't have much direct opportunity to observe that, but yes, I'm well aware of that widely held view. They

conducted their campaign to get the function pretty effectively. They said, we want it. We want it at State's expense. We want, I think it was 245 positions. I may have the number wrong, maybe it was 170 positions - that sounds more like it. That's American officer positions. They did that on the advice of career bureaucrats because you can't come up with the number politically, and they went out and they sort of won a political battle. I am told that the then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on two occasions appealed to President Jimmy Carter not to go forward with this executive order, that it was going to be devastating to State. Vance was obviously a very highly respected political appointee with some very good credentials in the foreign affairs area. He was ignored both times. A lot of people in the Service said that the whole integrity of the Foreign Service was at stake, that this is something you resign on principal over. Well, Vance later did resign on principal, but it was over the conduct of our pursuit of hostages in Iran. I think that's quite instructive, but he resigned over a matter of policy substance, not over a matter of bureaucratic turf which after all is the way, you know, you're entitled to interpret this issue as bureaucratic turf, it's just a matter of how you organize stuff. At any rate, let the record show that I was told that Vance twice raised with the president his objections and the president ignored those objections. So, how incompetent could the Commerce political people be? They won their war.

Q: They won the war.

LESSER: They won it, so you can call them whatever you like, but they got what they went after.

Q: Who got involved with talking to the people who were going over to Commerce? I mean were we encouraging people to go? How did that work?

LESSER: Well, from my standpoint, what the director general's office had to do was encourage Commerce to make them welcome. In other words to make sure that our people had the maximum option available to them, and the second part of it should make

it clear to them that they were welcome to stay at State also. We were largely successful there and that once again was a function that devolved entirely to the Bureau of Personnel because the Economic and Business Affairs Bureau, I think, behaved badly. Although I loved Deane Hinton and I had some very nice experiences with him, particularly in Belgium, which I didn't have, occasion to mention when we were talking about Belgium, but I think they handled this critical matter poorly. They were not effective in their own interests and they just left the whole issue to Personnel and Personnel I think acquitted itself well. We did make sure that the people who were affected were not screwed, that they had every opportunity to reassess their situation and that includes the FSNs who transferred over or did not transfer over to the Foreign Commercial Service.

Q: In this policy planning group, did you get any other sort of major tasks?

LESSER: Well, for a while I was the acting handicapped coordinator for the Department of State. During that time we were doing major revisions to the standards for determining how handicapped conditions would be taken into account for applicants into the Foreign Service and that was interesting.

Q: One of the ones I've always found rather interesting and I won't say disturbing, but it just seems of having when you hire, having a blind person come in as a Foreign Service officer and then having to hire a reader to go along with him and that always strikes me as you're paying two to do the work of one.

LESSER: Well, as it happens, I said I was acting handicapped coordinator. I became the acting coordinator when the coordinator, Robert Gordon, got named as ambassador to Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean. He himself was blind and his wife was hired as his reader. I actually carpooled with him... but he didn't drive.

Q: Yes, but he had been a Foreign Service officer?

LESSER: He lost his vision in the Service.

Q: I interviewed him a long time ago.

LESSER: A very nice man.

Q: An effective officer who knew what he was doing. I'm thinking of the problem of hiring somebody.

LESSER: Indeed. There was a case going on. I think I've got the timeframe right that was going on during that time of an applicant who passed the Foreign Service written exam and wasn't getting medical clearance to join the Foreign Service because he was blind and he was suing or threatening to sue. It raised the issue to the point where you had to articulate, well, what is your position on this. I think the Department worked very hard to be as accommodating as it could be and the implication of the question, Stu, suggests that it may have gone further than it makes sense to go. Particularly in the Carter administration and I'm a lifelong independent democrat, so my sympathies were with that administration with the liberal philosophy. There were very strong pressures to make room. If you go and look at an embassy overseas and you think what's your emergency evacuation plan and by the way how are you going to fit your blind officer into that and what role is he or she going to have in assisting. You know, they said, well, that person isn't going to be able to assist. That person is going to need assistance. It's actually going to divert resources from other things, well, that kind of argument or that kind of straightforward statement of the problem was not welcome at that time and in fact if I can divert to another issue which is related to that. We had goals and timetables at that time for the recruitment of minority officers into the Foreign Service and there was for very good reasons, with which I am 100% in sympathy, there was a desire to increase the representation of minorities in the Foreign Service.

Q: When we talk about minorities, were we talking specifically about African Americans?

LESSER: If you hadn't said that, I was about to say, not to put too fine a point on it, recruitment of minorities meant and means primarily recruitment of African Americans. It does incidentally mean recruitment of Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans and it has to mean also recruitment of women. Recruitment has to mean equitable assignments and promotions for all of these groups. You're talking about getting the word throughout the entire system and all of that is very complex even with the best will in the world and we did run into some rather serious problems between the bureau of personnel trying to carry out in conjunction with the EEO office headed by a very impressive guy named Burroughs at that time trying to improve our recruitment, but finding itself unable to come up to the goals and timetables which we were told repeatedly were not quotas. If you didn't reach them they might as well have been quotas because you were going to get your head handed to you. We had a tough time trying to meet the expectations and promises made by the Secretary of State to the president that he was going to meet the goals and timetables and then discovering that it was not humanly possible to do.

Q: What were the problems?

LESSER: The problems were initially that far too few African Americans took the Foreign Service exam. The ones who passed in many cases, this was society wide, you know, people, African Americans were being recruited to law firms and prestigious positions all over the place and the pool of qualified people who went to good quality schools and came out with first rate educations wasn't big enough for the demand and the Foreign Service has two major disadvantages, maybe three. One is that it doesn't pay very much. The second is that it's very slow to process applicants and they can get onboard somewhere else very rapidly and for a lot more money. And the third, possibly disadvantage is and then you're sent overseas. If you're a highly competent and ambitious African American, you know, it might not be appealing to be sent overseas where you're likely to face some discrimination of the kind that you've worked all your life to overcome here. You're going to be right back in it again in some respects and in some ways that are beyond anybody's

control. It's not discrimination from your own people and your own organization, but it's running into it overseas. So, the personnel bureau geared up to increase its recruitment efforts at traditionally African American universities and at African American recruiters. We didn't say African American in those days, I think we mostly said blacks or Afro-Americans. You couldn't do it as fast as the goals and timetables that had been adopted. Those goals and timetables had been worked out by matches to statistical averages and they had a pseudo-scientific look to them. Phil Habib also during this period was, this was before he became really famous as a Middle East negotiator, but he was already famous within the Foreign Service as a guy who called them as he saw them and was a sort of minority person himself as an Arab American. He was appointed to head a task force to look into our efforts there and I was present on the occasion of their delivering their report, which was reasonably fair to the bureau of personnel on its efforts. We were treated to a really scurrilous scolding from Ben Reid and Cyrus Vance about our failure to accomplish the goals, even though we came remarkably close. We were supposed to, the goal I think was 60 new minority officer candidates that year. With a tremendous push at the end of the year, we got over 50 and that included people who were not highly motivated and who as it turned out didn't stay in very long. In other words, ten or so of the 50 plus, were not good bets for staying in and having a normal Foreign Service career. So, the numbers weren't bad, they were pulled in.

We also got into kind of undignified arguments. For example, what about the Harvard graduate African American, a Colin Powell type who is superlative in everything and comes in without any reference to getting special consideration or special recruitment without any affirmative action. There were two or three people like this who said; you can't count me because I got no preference of any kind. There's no document in which I've ever said I was African American and so how do you determine these things? It's a program, which has very laudable intentions, but when you get into the nuts and bolts of it, it ends up bringing about a certain amount of bad behavior.

Q: Well, in a way the whole thing looks ridiculous. I have a picture showing we gave an award showing Colin Powell and George Schultz laughing together and all and here were two very ruddy-faced men. The idea that I mean to if you were to look at it you know, I mean what makes this person different from that person. The black community, what or African American community, how many quarters it gets, it moves into what was so awful about the Southern society before the Civil War. Specific names for how much so-called African blood you had in you, you know, I mean the whole thing is.

LESSER: Exactly. You know, Colin Powell, in an interview for an article for the New York Times several months ago was quoted as saying when he was asked something about how does it feel to be the first African American Secretary of State. He said, it hasn't been a problem this way or in his military career, too. Then he said - maybe this was ill advised, although far be it from me to advise Colin Powell about how he should express himself., he does perfectly well without my advice - he said, you know after all I ain't all that black. He got criticism from the African American community for having said that.

Q: Yes. Oh, yes.

LESSER: But, you know, I've already had occasion to mention that you can't tell Hutus from Tutsis, but you know what, when the knives came out, they thought they could tell. I think they could tell. I think that a lot of people were killed because people thought they were something that they really weren't. People think they can tell and people think that it's real, real important.

Q: What about, I mean things like, I mean if you're going to go after a group of high achievers, I would think Asian Americans, you know, if you're worried about a quota system, go after the Asian Americans, because they usually end up being valedictorians of their class and the whole thing. Were we doing that or was that sort of that really wasn't the name of the game?

LESSER: No, the goals and timetables actually did break out the numbers into the numbers from each group including Native Americans, but my recollection is that we found that there was nothing in it for us to make further distinctions, that the minorities were minorities. On the other hand, if we had come up at the end of the year and said we've got our 60 minorities and 30 of them are Asian Americans, I think we would have faced a political problem there. That didn't happen and how come it didn't happen, I couldn't tell you, I don't have any idea.

Q: Well, while we're still on the subject, one of the sort of puzzles and dilemmas is still around that faces American society is the fact that particularly Hispanic males don't see even from what we call the middle class, don't seem to graduate from colleague at the rate that they should and all. It seems to be in almost a cultural problem. Were you running into that?

LESSER: I don't, if it was a problem, it was of a much lower order. What I told you was what we got pressure on. This was the twilight of the single term Carter administration and that was where the pressure was.

Q: Well, was there anything else you were working on during this time?

LESSER: I don't sound busy enough, huh?Q: No, no.

LESSER: I'm teasing.

Q: I'm just trying to see if there's anything else.

LESSER: I think we've covered it all, although let me say as a kind of coda to my two years in the planning office of the director general's office that Harry Barnes remained as director general longer than any of his predecessors, but finally he left. For the final six months or so of my two years there, Joan Clark was the Director General. You've heard me enough to know that I kind of frame things in a relatively positive light, but I have to say

that the decline in intellectual quality was enormous and I was very discouraged by the approach to personnel policy that Joan Clark took which I thought was a very defensive bureaucratic approach. There was no interest in ideas, in new initiatives or anything like that.

Q: Well, this was her background, as being apparently a superb bureaucratic operator?

LESSER: Right. Harry Barnes was a policy wonk, he was a Bill Clinton type, and so at a meeting with Barnes, he would, say, well, how does this work and what if we tweak it this way and so on. Joan Clark would mostly ask, well, who's for it and whose against it? She would sort of test the political winds and say okay, we're going to go with the ones who are for it. I thought it was a pity because the DG position is really vital for making a case for being out ahead of issues and setting the agenda and anticipating issues in time to shape them and get the perspective of the very knowledgeable career Foreign Service into it. Once again, I'm sort of slighting the Civil Service by saying that, but I think there is some justification for placing the Foreign Service up as the primary thing there because the director general is the only spokesperson for the Foreign Service in the whole federal government.Q: How did you find the new Foreign Service Act? Was this something that was sort of looked upon with anticipation, dread? How did you find the Foreign Service itself was looking upon the Act?

LESSER: I have a hard time dealing with the question because I was in the office that included one of the major drafters of the Act, Bill Bacchus. He was nominally my boss during this time as the head of the policy staff. I say nominally because we worked quasi-independently. The Act was passed. It was a major initiative of also Ben Reid and his legacy to the Foreign Service as Under Secretary for Management. He was a very well qualified person for personnel management of this foreign affairs agency. Bacchus was an academic. He had written books about managing personnel in the Foreign Service. He'd written a book about the country director system. Jim Michel in the legal affairs bureau was the main legal person who drafted the Act. It's a major piece of work. It had to make its

way through the whole political process that has elements in it that none of us could really fathom.

In the end it was personally my undoing. It was the reason for an early end to my Foreign Service career. I had enough information to know if I stopped to think about it enough (and sometimes I did), that there were provisions in the Foreign Service Act that were not going to work in the interests of advancing my career. Since I believed that my career advancement was appropriate and that it was fully consistent with the American national interests (and my tongue is not exactly in my cheek when I say that), that's a serious problem. If I'm a good Foreign Service office and my career ought to be nurtured and developed and I should reach senior levels and I think that this Act will work against me and against my instincts of my career development, then I must conclude that I think there's something wrong with the Act. Indeed there was and I could see some of the problems inherent in the provisions of the Act. We may get to that a little bit later as it finally worked out in my own case. The idea that you would have a senior threshold and a new structure to manage flow-through from junior level career candidate level into the mid-level and tenured and finally over the threshold to the senior Foreign Service that you could manage that and you could manage it rationally. That was a nice concept and the machinery that was put into place was too easily subject to distortion and that is exactly what happened in the execution. It could have been anticipated. You could see that this could be played with to peoples' disadvantage.

Another major provision was that there would be only a single Foreign Service. That the Foreign Service Reserve corps would have to choose either to come into the worldwide available Foreign Service and be subject to the same rules as FSO generalists or they could retreat, is that the right word? They could become civil service and not be subject to overseas assignments and not get the benefits of Foreign Service, especially the retirement program. That made a lot of sense I think. It wasn't easy to implement in a number of other cases, people were put in awkward positions and in some cases the

mission of the Department may have been complicated by it, but by and large that was probably a healthy initiative.

Q: '81, whither?

LESSER: '81. I made an important career turn. I applied for and campaigned for and became the Deputy Executive Director of the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. They were not yet split into two bureaus at that time. The executive director was Sheldon Krys. He had already been executive director for a couple of years at that time. He was very highly regarded around the Department. He had won great credit for his management of the Iran hostage crisis and for good backstopping ultimately of the hostages and also the other kinds of administrator issues that came out of our leaving Iran at that time. I was very proud to win the job. I was not, on the face of it, an obvious candidate; it's an admin job and a senior grade job. I was not a senior. I was an 0-1 in the new nomenclature, senior threshold, and it was somewhat traditional for the geographic bureaus to have the deputy executive directors not be admin officers, the idea being that you're working with the country desks, you're working with the embassy senior region that you wanted to have a generalist perspective on resource issues. I think that makes a lot of sense. If we believe in the idea of Foreign Service generalists, then it make sense that you see in both directions with people who have that broader perspective. So, I was very happy to get the job and I was in it for the next three years, the first two years as Deputy to Sheldon Krys and then in the third year, when he finally did move on, to Mac Gerlach.

Q: Well, now what was the bureau's coverage at that time because these things change.

LESSER: The coverage was from Marrakech to Bangladesh. The coverage was most of the world's Islamic, Hindu and Jewish states. It would be nice to say all of them, but of course Indonesia and the Philippines are outside of the bureau and they're Islamic, but we do get all of the Hindu and Jewish ones, the one of each, but they're quite significant. The shape of the bureau was enormous from east to west and relatively narrow from north to

south. Of course, there was always some political backfire that said South Asia doesn't belong. It gets overwhelmed by the Arab world and Arab-Israel issues and so ultimately that was separated out to have another bureau, but the counter argument was that when the assistant secretary for NEA does speak on South Asian matters people will listen because it means that he or she - I don't think there has ever been a female assistant secretary for NEA, but there has been for South Asia - he or she decided that it's important enough to get to the top priority against the competition of Arab-Israel and oil issues and the like. Now with South Asia in a separate bureau, when is the Secretary of State going to pay attention to that? I don't know. That's a bureaucratic question, but back in my time NEA was divided into three major subdivisions with a deputy assistant secretary for each and South Asia was one of those.

Q: How did they divide this job up as deputy executive director? I mean what was your particular piece of the pie?LESSER: Well, I think it's somewhat analogous to be DCM and ambassador. I was Mr. Inside, Sheldon was Mr. Outside. I was the direct supervisor of the three post management officers, and our little personnel subdivision which managed civil service; post management officers actually handled the Foreign Service assignments. I was the supervisor of the budget and fiscal section which was five or six people headed by a Foreign Service person, but the rest were civil service. So, maybe they were, let me correct myself, I think it was all civil service. We were about 20 people in NEA/EX and I was the person who made sure that our little machine ran well, and I was also the alter ego to the executive director and had to be able to represent him on the larger stage in negotiation within the bureau and between bureaus, the executive directors of the other geographic and international organizations bureaus, and beyond to the functional bureaus like EB and political-military. Sometimes they're working together; sometimes they're in competition with one another. Sometimes we were dealing with other agencies because of our responsibility for supporting all U.S. government activities. Sometimes dealing with the foreign buildings operations because of property matters or diplomatic security which was still part of the A bureau at that time, but a pretty important force in its own right. I

was liaison to an awful lot of that, so I was busy running interference with a great many different constituencies.

Q: At first, who were the natural competitors that you had to deal with for resources, you know, people, resources?

LESSER: Well, the Department's budget function is kind of a massive operation and it includes the budget for each bureau, and the budget for each bureau includes the budgets for all of the posts in the bureau as well as for managing the bureau at home. It doesn't include the direct-hire American personnel costs, provided you've got authorized positions, but that was also a process in itself, authorized positions for the civil service and Foreign Service, but the actual cost of filling them didn't come from the bureau's budget. You had to be constantly alert for the money issues and pursuing the bureau's interest in being able to fund its operations. NEA likes to think of itself, correctly, as the crisis bureau and we had a special orientation to these matters because it was our embassies that got attacked and our embassies that got evacuated more than happened in any other part of the world. You've also got to staff your posts and you're in constant competition for the best candidates to go out to the posts. NEA has a very large number of language positions to fill and most of them are in hard languages where you had to factor in lengthy one or two year language training for Arabic or Hebrew, for Hindi, for whatever it happened to be. That was something that had to be attended to and this was one of the mantras of Sheldon Krys that we let our people know that if they come into NEA we're going to look out for them. We're going to look out for their next assignments, for example. If we ask them to take a difficult assignment, we're going to go to bat for them to get an assignment of their preference next time whether that's NEA or not. So, that gives you a little bit of the flavor of how we were projecting ourselves.

We also had another way of looking at it is that we're a customer service organization and our primary clients are our diplomatic and consular posts. We had 30-something posts, including consulates, in some 23 or 25 countries at that time. They go to the country desk

for policy guidance, but of course you can't make that clear a distinction what's policy and what's resources. They need to know that when they have a resource issue, we're going to back them up. Resources include bollards and berms for security against truck bombs and going to bat for them when they need more office space and FBO will need to come in with some of their money or some of their expertise in backing them up. The highest priority for our post management officers was to be responsive, timely and in the most positive manner possible to requests from our posts. We'd sometime have to give them a dash of reality that they can't get something that they might want. That was the sort of the atmospherics around being in that office.

Q: In your area you probably had more professional ambassadors than any other area.

LESSER: Yes. That's probably true.

Q: Being a crisis place one knows a reluctant, I mean on the part of political people to go in and get themselves blown up in Lebanon.

LESSER: Yes, and they know better for the most part than to ask for it, even if they're brave, they think there are some issues here.

Q: Yes, but anyway, this means you've got a bunch of rather skilled operators out there all demanding stuff. How did you find this? Let's talk about the ambassadors. How did you sort this out?

LESSER: I can get off easy on that question, Stu, because I was the Deputy Executive Director. Sheldon dealt with the ambassadors and as it happened, I mean Sheldon and he later did become an ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago, he was a little bit like Frank Crigler in Rwanda. “That's my job, Larry, I'm the one, I'm the public face, I'm the one who deals with the chiefs of state.” (There's a little play on words there because this is the chiefs of the Department of State.) For the most part ambassadors were steered away, not

away from me, but they were steered. When an ambassador was around, Sheldon was available and talked to them.

Q: What were some of, I always end up dwelling on problems, but where, I mean it does show how the system works. Where did you find you were having to deal with, I would suppose Lebanon at this time was a difficult civil war.

LESSER: Indeed it was. Well, I can illustrate by talking a little bit about one or two troubleshooting trips I was sent on as NEA/EX's representative. Sheldon sent me out to troubleshoot at posts which had problems. I went on one occasion to Beirut; it was just a few weeks after the Marine barracks had been blown up. At the airport, General Joy was in charge of the Marine contingent there. Our embassy was operating behind tremendous barricades, including tank traps. We were planning to build a bomb shelter at the ambassador's residence, which was up on a hill a few miles away from the embassy, with a beautiful view of the rest of the world. I got in and out of Beirut by U.S. Navy helicopter from Larnaca in Cyprus late one afternoon. I guess it could have been a harrowing kind of thing, but it was more sort of seriocomic. I just turned up at Larnaca, as instructed, and waited for a helicopter and stood around on a tarmac until somebody motioned to me. I had no travel order documents or anything of the kind. My luggage was what I carried over my shoulder although I was on a three-week trip that took me to a number of different posts, but I traveled light. I got on the helicopter, nobody told me where it was going, but I assumed it was gong to Beirut. They assumed that I wanted to go to Beirut and when it got there, around sunset, it set down right on the strand on an empty little parking lot. The door opened and the guy motioned to me and told me to get out. As soon as I was out the hatch went up and the chopper was gone and I'm standing there thinking what the hell is this and where am I anyway. There was nobody to be seen. There was a little bluff across the street and a few weeks later a couple of Americans were shot from that bluff while they were getting out of a helicopter. I knew if somebody wanted to shoot me at that moment that I was there to be shot. I walked to the edge of the parking lot

where there was a little building with a couple of people in it and I asked them how do you get to the American embassy?

Q: This is what I'm trying to get a feel for the thing.

LESSER: Okay, so the Lebanese guys in the little house called the American embassy, the embassy sent a car and they fetched me and we had a brief meeting and planned for the next day. They said you're staying at this hotel, but it's outside the secure perimeter so we have to get you out there and get us back in before curfew. So, so long, Larry, see you tomorrow. I stayed in this ten-story hotel. I discovered that there was at least one other guest in the hotel because the two of us were in the dining room that evening. I never saw another soul. It was very early in the morning that I woke up to the sound of vehicles on tread going by in the street below, so I went to the window and took a look and there were a string of armored personnel carriers. I'm not sure whose, ours I presumed, or friends of ours, and then it occurred to me I probably shouldn't have come out to the window. I forgot to mention that before I went to bed that night I watched the fireworks out over the water. This is trading of small arms fire and missiles and mortars that you could see from there. I was in a war zone, and in the morning the embassy came and fetched me and we went on our rounds. We had armored escorts. We went up to the ambassador's residence to talk about...

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LESSER: The ambassador was I believe Reginald Bartholomew, but I could be misremembering. I didn't have much to do with the ambassador on that trip. It occurred to me at the time and anyway, I didn't think of it before I got there, that this is a hell of a way to run diplomat relations. For one thing, there was no government in Lebanon so if you think of traditional diplomacy as dealing with the host government, well forget it. This was a failed state at that particular time. We even had an AID officer, but there was no aid program. You couldn't have a program. There were no institutions. There was no place to

put money. There was no place to put equipment. There was no place to train people. This is a war zone and if diplomats are to function in a war zone, and I'm sure there is a very important place for them, but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to pretend that you've got an embassy and to try to run it like a peacetime embassy when you've got snipers and no functioning host government, not to mention the chances for accidentally getting caught in the crossfire kind of accidents. It was a very strange weird experience, but I must say our people were functioning with incredible bravery. In order to be inside the perimeter everybody was working in extremely cramped quarters. Our Lebanese employees cheek by jowl with the American employees, say a dozen people and their desks in a living room with sometimes two people at the same desk one on each side a little bit like we're sitting now except that it would be only one table between us. They had been working like that already for months and they were going to be doing so for another many months. It was U.S. policy not to, it would give the wrong signal on using, there were quotations around that, give the wrong signal if we were to shut down. We needed the image of a functioning American embassy; that was the official line.

Q: I talked to somebody who was there at the time and talking about he would cross the green line or whatever it is to talk to people in the opposition and all that. I asked the question, what did this mean, I mean were you getting anything new and the answer was no, not really. The push was to keep doing this and you know you really do ask the question, I mean these are American lives in jeopardy and frankly is it worth it?

LESSER: Let me tell you a little vignette which is a propos of not exactly that, but kind of the atmospherics behind it; why do we do these things when it's not clear what policy objectives are being served. One day the Assistant Secretary of State for NEA who was at that time Nick Veliotes, a wonderful man, comes breezing in late to a country directors meeting, his major staff meeting of the week. The meeting started without him because we didn't know whether he would be coming. He comes breezing in and of course it was a very informal kind of atmosphere among the people there and Nick Veliotes is a guy who doesn't stand on ceremony and a guy with a very refined sense of humor who was

on a hotspot. He turns to Frank Matthews who was the press guy for NEA and he said, “Oh, Frank, Frank, listen, you may get a question today from the noon briefing: 'Is it true that the United States has no discernible policy in the Middle East?' Here's your press guidance. The answer is, “Well, yes, I think it's true, but I'll have to get back to you.” The room dissolved in laughter. Now, I'm not sure, I don't know where Nick was coming from, what had just happened that gave rise to that and it was my idea of very high humor. It is sort of responsive to your question.

We do a certain number of things because we do them or because we haven't thought of something better to do or because it is sort of expected of us. Some place along the line somebody is supposed to come along and say, wait a minute folks, let's figure this thing out. What are we trying to accomplish? If you can articulate that, then the next step will be, okay what are the steps we need to take to get there? Then, if what you're doing doesn't fit in with that, well, change what you're doing.

Q: Did you find that most of the posts in NEA are difficult posts, aren't they?

LESSER: I'm not going to argue with that.

Q: So, that I would think you know you say you wanted to make sure Sheldon Krys had said or make sure we could tell the people that if they had served in Beirut or Bangladesh or something, they'd get a nice post. Well, when you think of a nice post, usually you think of Geneva or Luxembourg or Buenos Aires or something like that, but you've got these other duchies over there and the head duke is saying screw you, this is my turf.

LESSER: Sure. There's a certain amount of soft soap that goes along with this. Yes, we'll get you a good post, but listen if you like, if you found Beirut exciting, have I got a deal for you. Life in Yemen may be tough, but what a great sense of satisfaction when you've mastered it and when you've accomplished something and when you've moved the government in Yemen closer to our point of view when we don't have a whole lot to offer them on the face of it or when you've really, when you get across in an analytical

report something about the host government that really has an impact on U.S. policy so we take it into account or when you get a new embassy built constructed to, God help us, under the new security standards in a country where that's quite an accomplishment. So, Sheldon and I - because I enthusiastically joined him on this - could talk to our people and say, okay, it's okay for your next assignment. Well, sure you can go to Luxembourg, but you'll die of boredom there. With what you've just done and with the resume you now have, we can get you into a position where you really will have some authority, you'll be supervising people, but yes, you're going to go to Damascus where you've got to deal with a hostile government that supports terrorism or you're going to go to Morocco and have secret talks with Palestinian leaders or whatever. Wouldn't you like to do that, having had a taste of what it's like to be right on the cutting edge of the conduct of American policy overseas? The answer in many cases was yes, give me more of that.

Q: I mean in a way, this is what a significant portion of the people who come into the Foreign Service want.

LESSER: Yes.

Q: The idea of Luxembourg to me sounded kind of dull.

LESSER: Precisely.

Q: I was in personnel and where did I put myself? Consul General in Saigon.

LESSER: Yes. We had, I don't know the guy's name, but one very good performer, Arabist, got assigned as ambassador I guess it was to Qatar, and after something like a year he said, get me out of here, I'm withering away, I've got nothing to do. It wasn't an interesting country for somebody who liked to be on the cutting edge. So, people invented some issue that he was the world's greatest expert for and he was drafted to head up a task force or something and he was moved on out. I talked to Dan Newberry, I think it was Newberry, after he left Bangladesh, he became consul general in Tangier and he did the

same thing. Bangladesh doesn't sound maybe at first blush like an exciting place, but it is. Maybe you're not at risk of your life everyday, but you've got really interesting tasks. And then, to be in a backwater, you know, where you just show the flag and nothing more... NEA attracted the kind of people who liked action.

Q: Were there very definite Southeast Asian hands and sort of Arab hands?

LESSER: We say South Asian.

Q: South Asian, excuse me. That's right, that's Vietnam and that sort of stuff.

LESSER: Yes, to a very large degree the South Asia hands are a separate group from the Arabists and the Middle East guys.

Q: Yes. How about, how did you find staffing our embassy in Tel Aviv? Was this, had we reached the point at one point where officers who were in Arab countries couldn't go to Tel Aviv, Israel and vice versa and Jewish officers who couldn't go to Arab countries and they couldn't go to Israel. I mean had this all broken down?

LESSER: I believe it had all broken down. Remember I'm the same naive guy who told you earlier that I couldn't tell a Hutu from a Tutsi and we now know rightly or wrongly they thought they could tell one from another because they had to know which ones to kill. My experience was that for assignment purposes we were generally speaking aware of people's backgrounds and to a large extent aware of their religious affiliation, their religious group. In other words, not their faith, not a question of belief, but what group they were considered to be members of and that it had very little bearing on where they were assigned. That by the way goes also for whether they were men or women because you may recall because it's still true that in a lot of Muslim countries women are at a decided disadvantage in the day to day world, in the world of business and public affairs. We were assigning a lot of women to Arab countries and that time was the beginning of career Foreign Service women being assigned as ambassadors.

Q: On this I don't know when it happened, but I was listening to John Gunther Dean the other day giving a talk and he was assigned as ambassador to Lebanon and said agrement had been received and everything was ready for him to go. All of a sudden he was called by the, I think, Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs and said I just looked and see that your wife's family maiden name was [Jewish name]. Will that make a problem? He said, well, you know, I was a secular Jew coming out of Germany.

LESSER: John Gunther Dean?

Q: Oh, yes.

LESSER: I had no idea.

Q: It was Deanshelfer or something like this.

LESSER: I had no idea.

Q: His father was the head of the Jewish community in Hamburg I think at the time. I mean this is sort of, this isn't my thing, I'm a Foreign Service officer and so he went.

LESSER: And so he went?

Q: Yes.

LESSER: Okay.

Q: But, you know, times have changed.

LESSER: Times have changed by the time I'm talking about also.

Q: Of course part of it was that we changed them because we were saying we weren't going to play this game anymore.

LESSER: Nice going, yes. I'm glad you say that. I think that we're pretty much on the same wavelength. Look, this is always sort of the cusp of the issue. You see what you see, you know what you know. I get to know you, Stu Kennedy, and I want to know everything about you and so I come to learn some thing. Now, on race we tend to know one or two things before we know anything else because of the way you look. When we know people's names, we know or think we know something about what ethnic group they come from, too, although obviously that can be misleading. Well, fine, there's nothing wrong with knowing stuff. The only question is how do you use that and how do you behave. The American faith is that we put it aside. We apply it when it applies and we don't apply it when it doesn't and your qualifications to serve at a Foreign Service post, it should have very little bearing. On the other hand, if an African American officer says I don't want to serve in South Africa or I don't want to serve in Poland because it's more trouble than I'm looking for, then you'd have to respect that, too.

Q: Sure. Did you find, I mean, you know, the Israeli lobby is renown for its power within the political life of the United States. Did that play any role in dealing with sort of allocation of resources or anything like that? You know, in other words, you put marble bathtubs in Tel Aviv and you don't give them to Amman or something like that.

LESSER: I think I can give you a categorical no on that. I never heard, I can't recall ever hearing anything that suggested that there were political interests in giving first dibs on any resources.

Q: Nobody gave a damn.

LESSER: I think so. I think they concentrate their fire on policy matters and on appearances, but not the marble bathtubs. Did we, if you said, did you ever run into an ambassador who wanted gold fixtures and marble bathtubs? The answer was oh, yes, I guess we did, but it didn't come out of where the guy was assigned. It was a matter of individual character.

Q: Well, was there anything else you think we might cover during this period?

LESSER: Man o man, I think we've got a good flavor of it. I came up with some things that I had pretty much forgotten. That has happened all along with this process. I came in with no notes. I figure this is more fun if I don't have a preset agenda of things I'm determined to tell you.

Q: Well, in the first place on this, there are often night thoughts. I mean after you've left, gee I wish I'd said that or something. The nice thing about it is when we start a new session, you can say, I forgot to mention so and so and so and so and that's fine, we can do it. Also, you'll have a chance to amend and extend your remarks.

LESSER: When I see the draft.

Q: So, we'll pick this up now in 1984 and you're off where?

LESSER: I'm going to Bangladesh, to Dhaka, as DCM, which is my final Foreign Service tour. I retired in '87. I don't have much to say about the time after I came back from Dacca from '86 to '87. It was only about an eight month period and actually I might have something to say because I have already had night thoughts there to the extent you're interested for this project in talking about the workings of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which we already talked about a little yesterday, and of my subsequent experience working for the Office of the Inspector General as a reemployed annuitant.

Q: Yes, also, you did some election monitoring and you already have done some, haven't you?

LESSER: I'm going next month. Yes, and I'm also now a member of the Foreign Service Grievance Board and I could say a few things about that.

Q: So, great, we've got a lot to talk about.

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Today is October 2, 2002. Larry, Bangladesh, 1984. In the first place, how did you get picked as DCM?

LESSER: Well, funny you should ask because that was the first thing I was going to tell you anyway. This also is a prelude to a later discussion of how the system works and the effects of the Foreign Service Act of 1980. The DCM job in Bangladesh is a senior job; an FE-OC job. I was an O-1, and I had opened my window so that I was competing in an up-or-out system to get into the Senior Foreign Service. As deputy executive director in NEA, that was also a senior job. I had no realistic expectation of getting promoted out of that job, primarily because it's fundamentally an admin job and I was an economic officer, and so I didn't really think I would be very competitive, especially as the number of promotion opportunities was diminishing. So, there I was as the deputy executive director and actually part of the process of staffing overseas jobs including the senior jobs such as DCM in Dhaka. Howard Schaffer, who had been the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs, had been designated and was going out as ambassador and so working under Mac Gerlach, who was by then the Executive Director. I was assisting in looking for candidates to be his DCM (that position was coming vacant in the normal rotation). Howie was a very proactive kind of officer anyway, so he didn't need a lot of help, and he did a certain amount of his own recruiting, but Dhaka is not a garden spot. Actually it is a little bit of a garden spot, but doesn't have the reputation of being a very attractive posting, and it's very remote, halfway around the world from Washington, and it's in a part of the world, South Asia and Bangladesh in particular, which probably didn't have the image of being the place for fast-track people to go and anyway, what with one thing and another, no at-grade candidates were coming forward who were interested in the job and who were agreeable with Ambassador-Designate Schaffer. So, one day, one fine day, Stu, Mac Gerlach came back from a meeting with Howie Schaffer and he said, “Howie Schaffer wants to know if you would be interested in being his DCM in Dhaka.” I said,

“Well, I have a fairly nuanced view on that.” The nuance was this, Stu. Back ten years or so earlier when I was the first and I think only economic officer on the Bangladesh desk, when Bangladesh was first formed, my wife said, “This isn't a very good idea, because they'll want you to serve in Bangladesh.” She wouldn't have looked forward to going there. I told her, “I'll tell you something. They won't assign me there if I don't want to go. I pledge to you, dear wife, that I won't ever ask to be assigned there unless I have your agreement.” So, that had been ten years or so earlier, but it wasn't a forgettable thing. Now, here it comes back. So, I said two things to Mac Gerlach: I said, “Well, Howie knows where to find me.” He knew me well. We had served together in New Delhi. That was my first tour and of course he knew me in our assignments at that time, in 1984. I said, “Howie Schaffer can speak to me and I'd be happy to have that conversation.” I don't remember exactly what the order of things was, but Howie Schaffer did ask me to come up to his office and told me that ... and I'll be a little irreverent here in characterizing it. Let's say that he said, well, listen Larry, you're aware that I'm having some difficulty in filling the job of DCM and it looks like there's nobody available whose also qualified and so in desperation I'm going to take you even though you're not qualified. Well, he didn't say anything like that, at any rate, he did say, would I be interested and I said I'll have to discuss it with my wife. But notice, I didn't bid on the job. I had a bid list out. I was to be transferred that year and the DCM in Bangladesh was not on my list. So, I went home and I told my wife and I explained to her very carefully that I was not going against my pledge, but that I did want to take the job and that I thought that I would like it very much. I also thought it was probably going to provide the very best opportunity I could have for getting the promotion that I would need into the Senior Foreign Service. Our eldest child, our son born in Nigeria, was at college already and not living at home. Our daughter who was born in India as it happens (and who became a mother for the first time a week and a half ago, so I'm now a grandfather), my daughter was going into her senior year of high school at a DC public school. So, Harriet and I, Harriet being the wife, worked out an understanding that she would stay back the first year with Nina to let her finish high school because transferring to an overseas post for your daughter's senior year is a very stressful thing and really

unfair to the child, and Harriet would join me the second year. On that basis I went back to Ambassador-Designate Schaffer and said I would like the job. They worked it through the personnel system, that is the seniors ceded the job to a non-senior, which didn't present any extraordinary difficulty, and that's how I got designated for the job. So, I was now in 'program direction,' whatever my background had been.

Q: All right, in 1984, what was the situation in Bangladesh sort of internally and all and also our relations with them?

LESSER: Bangladesh was the seventh most populous country in the world, a country that is approximately the size of Wisconsin. That was the conventional comparison. I prefer comparison with Louisiana, which is almost the same size.

Q: Because of the Delta and all.

LESSER: Because the Delta geographically has a greater resemblance to Louisiana. Bangladesh had about half the population of the United States. So, if you could picture half of the population of the U.S. in the space of Louisiana, you've got a beginning idea of what they had to contend with. So, it's an extremely densely populated country. We sometimes again a little irreverently say, well, yes, but the people aren't very big. One time when I was on the desk I made a visit out there. I may have already told you this story.

Q: Go ahead.

LESSER: I was at the airport getting ready to leave late at night and had some time waiting around. They had an unattended baggage scale and I think I may have stepped on it and it read my weight. The point is while I stood there a number of Bangladeshis happened by and once one saw, another one kind of sidled over and person after person weighed himself. I say himself, I don't recall that there were any women. Women aren't found walking around late at night in the airport. I got in position where I could read what their weights were. I must have seen 20 different people weigh themselves and not one

of them exceeded 120 pounds. I weigh about 190 and I'm not fat. So, Bangladeshis aren't very big, but there are a hell of a lot of them. The country was characterized by the World Bank as the largest-poorest country in the world. A funny construction, but it's quite vivid. So, it was one of the few countries outside of Africa and Haiti that are in the category of poorest, and it was large with 110 or 120 million people. It's predominantly Muslim because the Hindus mostly left at partition in 1947 when East Bengal became part of Pakistan and so the country is predominantly Muslim. It doesn't match the stereotype of Islamic societies. The people are subcontinent people. They have a great deal in common with Indian Hindus; and they have their own Hindus because still 8% or 10% of the Bangladesh population is Hindu. Present-day Bangladesh is historically the hinterland of Bengal; if Calcutta is the center of Bengali culture and commerce, then Bangladesh was a hinterland to that, and I want to be careful how I say this, but historically, they were predominantly something of a left-behind people. Who are Muslims in South Asia anyway? To a very large extent they are people who converted from Hinduism, and why would you convert from Hinduism? Because you were low caste and not treated right in a Hindu-dominated society, so that a very large proportion of Bangladeshis are probably, I'm not a scholar on this, but this is sort of conventional diplomatic wisdom, probably are descendants of people who never had much of a place in their society. They are people therefore who carry around with them something of an inferiority complex. That works against them in putting together a stable political system and in putting together a rational plan for development. On top of that they fought a very bloody war of independence in 1971 with the help of India, which is not their natural friend because of the religious difference, with the help of India and not much help from very many other countries and certainly no help from the United States, attained independence, but started life as an independent country with some grave disadvantages, including that what infrastructure they had had been very severely damaged. Hundreds of bridges had been destroyed and you need bridges in a Delta country in order to move anything except if you're moving along the rivers by boat. So, here was a country which started with next to nothing. They had been a net surplus producer, a net exporter of rice at the turn of the century, but they

had long since lost the race to keep their food production ahead of their population growth. They now had a tremendously large population, a very inefficient agricultural system, and an extremely inefficient infrastructure for moving things and distributing things. Their leading export product was jute - jute fiber and jute products - and jute is a very expensive and labor intensive material to produce and it was losing markets anyway.

Q: Is it a vine?

LESSER: It's not a vine, it's what would you call it? It's like, related to hemp or a tough grass and it makes a tough and durable material. In the U.S. its main use has been as carpet backing and they had a very large part of the carpet backing market in the U.S. The U.S. used to make a lot of carpets, but it was losing market share to plastic, to polypropylene types of products which are oil based and Bangladesh doesn't have oil. Then they were losing market share for the fairly obvious reason that their market was so seriously disrupted by the conflict that culminated in their gaining independence. So, jute in the best of circumstances wouldn't be the basis for a rise from poverty to a more comfortable economic situation, but these were far from the best of circumstances. This was an extremely needy country on a humanitarian basis, and also extremely needy if you were trying to project how they could become self-sufficient and take their place in the community of nations.

Politically, I haven't talked about that, maybe that's just my temperament. Politically, their independent struggle was lead by Sheik Mujibur Rahman, who was a fairly stereotypical street politician, a rabble-rousing politician, a great speaker and like others with that talent - one could point nowadays to Yasser Arafat as somewhat comparable - he's very good at rallying people and getting them really revved up to go after what they believe they're entitled to, but those are not the same skills that you need to run a government. He was the father of the country and he became the first Prime Minister and he was disastrous as the Prime Minister. He and many members of his family were assassinated. They were replaced by a general, and he too was assassinated. The army in various guises led the

government, the Bangladesh army is a very professional army in the British tradition, but it doesn't have much of a mission. Bangladesh doesn't have designs on projecting its power outside of its own borders. It's not quite absurd, but they also don't have a very significant defense need because nobody is casting covetous eyes on the land of Bangladesh.

Q: Particularly India.

LESSER: But India, here was India, they provided the indispensable support that enabled Bangladesh to come into existence, but it would only be a matter of time before the more natural mutual suspicion would take over, and it's not just a religious suspicion. Bangladesh is down-river from India and water is a very precious commodity in a lot of places in the world, no less there, so that sooner or later, and in fact it was sooner, there would be conflicts between India and Bangladesh over water rights and the rights to dam and irrigate and divert the waters of the Brahmaputra and the Ganges. So, when I got there in '86, the senior general, General Ershad was the head of government.Q: You got there in '86 or '84?

LESSER: Sorry, thank you, I got there in '84. I left in '86. Ershad was still there, however. Thank you. Ershad was the head of the government, which had a cabinet that included several military people and a somewhat larger number, I don't remember exactly how it broke out, of civilians who were themselves a mixture of people with political backgrounds and people with credentials as academics or technocrats, and it wasn't a bad mix. All the same they had been in power for a while and there was a lot of movement from the two main political parties for the military to go back to the barracks and allow the civilians to take over. I might say a little more about the political parties, but maybe I can skip it for now. Ershad did hold elections during the time I was there and he civilianized himself. He retired from the military, ran for president, and won. So, they successfully accomplished a transition from military to civilian rule that was not very disruptive. As a kind of sidebar, this was the third country where I served that had a military government. A kind of a little oddity of my career, but when I was in Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso, General Lamizana

was the head of the government. When I was in Rwanda, General Habyarimana was the head of the government, and here General Ershad, the senior army general - in fact in all three cases, they were the senior army leaders who were the chiefs of state or chiefs of government. In all three cases a think a dispassionate observer would say, well, it's not great, it's not democracy, it's not Jeffersonian, but it's probably better than any realistic alternative. The fact was that the two main political parties at the time, the Awami League headed by Mujib's daughter, Sheik Hasina, and the BNP, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, headed by Begum Zia, the widow of the assassinated second leader, those parties, well, to begin with, the two heads, the two women at the heads of the parties couldn't stand one another and couldn't agree on who would cross the street first. The parties were in a constant battle with one another and it didn't look like they would transition into a democratic government, and also it didn't look like either party was equipped to fight or limit corruption. So, it would have been difficult to have any confidence if one of those parties was in charge. There was also no chance of the two of them getting together and having a kind of unity government that would be an improvement over a government led by top military people. So, there you are.

Now, how are our relations with Bangladesh; I think you asked that, too? Our relations were remarkably good. Our role in the independence struggle had been to sympathize with Pakistan and to argue; in fact Kissinger's famous expression that took him to Pakistan came out of that struggle. We tilted to Pakistan and of course we bet on the wrong horse there because once the Indians got into the equation, there was no question that Pakistan would not prevail, Pakistan was going to be rendered asunder and turned into two countries. I think in retrospect most people would say that was the better solution than what we were thinking of, let them go their separate ways. But the Bangladeshis very deeply resented the role of the United States during the independence period and here I was 13 years later and relations were extremely good. Many elite Bangladeshis would say always with a smile that they would love to be the 51st state. We're not too surprised to hear that from some places, but with that recent history and they said we owed a blood

debt. Occasionally they'd throw it up at us, but it was only as a kind of negotiating ploy or a rhetorical device. The fact was that the Bangladeshi leadership believed strongly that one way or the other they needed to throw in their lot with us. They needed us to be on their side, that the international consortium giving assistance to Bangladesh would do so only if the Americans were in favor of doing it. So, as an American diplomat doors were opened very thoroughly and it was always a pleasure to be dealing with Bangladesh. They also, however, regarded it as a way to keeping leverage and of being an international player that they would have good relations with communist countries and radical Islamic countries. They did certainly have a very large Soviet embassy there. There was also a PLO office in Dhaka.

Q: PLO means?

LESSER: The Palestine Liberation Organization.

Q: We were not talking to them in those days.

LESSER: We were not. That's correct. But the Bangladeshis gave them the status equivalent to a diplomatic mission. That's all that really needs to be said about that. Bangladesh also didn't have very deeply established institutions so that in doing diplomatic business with them we would find that, well, for example, the Department would ask us to make a demarche encouraging the Bangladeshis to vote in favor of our position on some United Nations issue. The director general at the foreign ministry would hear us and say - just for example - he might say, okay, that sounds right, we're with you. A week later we would get a cable from New York saying that Bangladesh had voted the other way at the UN, and I'd go back in or our political counselor would go back in and ask what happened, and the answer if he was being frank and candid which Bangladeshis generally are, the answer was well, we instructed our ambassador there and he doesn't always read his mail and he's a retired army general, even senior to Ershad. He does his own negotiating among the missions in New York and I guess he decided not to follow those instructions.

Well, thank you very much, but it does kind of say, what's the point of our doing all of this business? That was a frustration we felt that maybe there's a little bit of a cross-cultural thing here. I don't think the Bangladeshis would have understood very well if we said this is no way to do business. It is the way that they do business.

Q: Yes. In the first place, what was living like in Bangladesh at the time, because one always thinks of a place where every year they have a flood that kills thousands of people and you think of it as being life as on stilts? It's like being in Venice or something like that.

LESSER: Well, people are living quite nicely in Venice, Stu. Out at the edges life is very perilous for Bangladeshis. I had heard of the great typhoon, which occurred, when, around the same time as the independence struggle, '71 or '72. It was said to have swept away and this is you know, you sort of have to stop over the number, 400,000 or 500,000 souls swept out into the Bay of Bengal. Now this is a typhoon, not the river flooding which is annual and predictable, but this is a tropical storm, which comes in periodically and is relatively unpredictable. That's one of the all time greatest disasters of the world, but there's a couple of things to be said about that. One is it's interesting for starters that people say maybe it was 400,000 maybe it was 300,000, maybe it was 500,000. Why don't they know? Well, I don't think most of the people living in those areas that were swept out to sea were even recorded people. These were people out on the extreme margins. Why didn't it happen before? Because people weren't living there before. Why were they living there now? Because the country was so densely populated that people had pushed out to areas that were fundamentally unsuited for human habitation. That means maybe nine years out of ten you can live there and grow rice there and make a living, but that tenth year you're going to see a major storm and it's going to sweep everything away. Well, there shouldn't be human communities living in places like that, but there were. Those were out at the extreme edges and that doesn't speak to the great stability of the greater part of Bangladesh, which has a system that has developed over the centuries of coping with the changes in the weather and the changes in the water level. Road traffic was generally very congested and there were a lot of roads that would be washed out

during the floods, but an awful lot of traditional transportation in Bangladesh is on the rivers themselves and it's a very beautiful thing to be in Sonar Bengal, Golden Bengal.

Bangladeshis are very sentimental about their country. They love their country. They love it with a physical love and you can appreciate it when you get out into the country and especially when you get out into these locally designed wooden boats; some with sails and some with oars and some with poles to push them. It's a beautiful place and it's a pleasure to live there. Furthermore, the urbanized educated Bangladeshis we dealt with are sort of born talkers. They like to shmooze, they like to socialize. They like to tell you what they know and if they run out of what they know, they go on to tell you stuff they don't know, and it's up to you to sort out how much of it to trust. The ones who have money and status love to invite foreigners, and foreign diplomats in particular, to their homes and they serve wonderful food there and regale them with wonderful stories. So, life in Dhaka was really quite pleasant. There's not much crime; practically no violent crime at all. A lot of accidents, a lot of health risks, but no more than many other places. I would say that in the U.S. diplomatic community, the majority of people were very happy to be serving there. The ones who had representational responsibilities who were out in the community and meeting Bangladeshis were probably happier, the happiest of all, but even if you weren't, it was not a hard place to live comfortably.

Q: Well, during this '84 to '86 period were there any issues that particularly came up?

LESSER: You would think I would know it right off. In a way I think I'm going to say there were none. This was a period of very smooth relations. During that period there were external matters that affected our life. I mentioned that there was a Libyan embassy. This was also the period when the U.S. attacked Qadhafi, bombed places where he was thought to be staying and there were demonstrations and threats against U.S. diplomats around the world, particularly in Islamic countries. Although Bangladesh is not typical, they do have a considerable fellow feeling with other Islamic countries and so we perceived a high threat level at various times and I was sort of the lead person along with the regional

security officer to deal with the ministry of interior and make sure that we were getting the protection we needed and that we were being kept apprized of their political intelligence of any threats that might be directed against us. There were some nervous times, but there were no actual incidents. Well, I can remember one incident where this was not directed specifically against the U.S. There were also labor actions called hartals, which meant essentially a shutdown of everything and they were scheduled by one political party or the other or by labor unions supported by political parties. When there was a hartal, mobs would go into the streets to make sure that no vehicular traffic was allowed to move. Dhaka has an enormous fleet of bicycle rickshaws and sometimes the hartal included them and sometimes it didn't. The main thrust was to keep the modern sector, the people who were driving cars and buses, from moving around and bringing economic life to a standstill sometimes for more than a day, sometimes for, I don't recall that it ever was more than about three days at a shot. We had to make a decision. Our embassy at that point, we had not built the new highly secure embassy. We had the upper stories of a five or six story building in the heart of the old downtown business section, but all of our personnel lived several miles away commuting distance in an area that had a lot of these nice single family houses. There was only one main route and only a couple of alternatives to go between the two. So, when there was going to be a hartal, there would be no way for our personnel safely to go between the office and home. One time I was downtown at the office when an unscheduled set of demonstrations was occurring and I honestly don't recall what the occasion was. I don't think it had anything specifically to do with the U.S. So, my driver and I did not have an armored car (the ambassador did), and we started moving weaving through side streets to try to find a way around where we knew there were angry demonstrators. We happened to emerge into one square which turned out to be the wrong place at the wrong time, just a bad guess, and we got spotted by a few youths, a couple of them with bricks in their hands. (You couldn't stone cars because there are no stones in Bangladesh. It's just, it's vast, a river.

Q: Delta.

LESSER: Delta, thank you very much. So, there is a very large brick making industry and the bricks are the building material of choice and so people could get bricks, but they couldn't get rocks.) This fellow charged the car at full speed and cocked the brick and threw it at the car from maybe five feet distance. But he missed. I had dived down so that if it did come through the window I wouldn't be at the window anymore, and my driver had done the same. But the guy missed the car completely. The guy, he may have speed, but he's never going to pitch in the major leagues unless he gets better control. We were able to escape from that. That was probably the closest I ever came in my entire Foreign Service career to getting hurt.

Returning to the question you started with Stu, were there any issues? The answer is no. There were no serious bilateral issues between us and Bangladesh during those couple of years and we were, there was no reason for there to be any. They were doing a pretty good job at moving along in the hope that something wonderful would happen and they would eventually find a way to be more self-sufficient and some of those things did happen.

Q: Did we have a Peace Corps aid program there?

LESSER: We had a large aid program. We did not have a Peace Corps program. There had been Peace Corps in East Pakistan. They left I'm not sure when they left, but I think they were gone quite a long time before the independence struggle and they had never come back to independent Bangladesh. They have since come back in relatively small numbers and we used to talk about the desirability of having the Peace Corps, but some of the old suspicions of the U.S. lingered and anyway, they were getting, they were getting assistance from a rather large, just about half of our total American direct hire personnel were USAID people.

Q: Was there any particular tie or affinity between Bangladesh and the province of Bengal?

LESSER: I'm trying to recall. I think you know, in the long term of history of what I remember and what I don't, I must be a relatively non-political person. Good thing I was not a political officer. There were a lot of Bangladeshis who had connections to West Bengal. There wasn't a great deal of human traffic between the two and there was not much trade traffic either between the two. They had grown apart. Remember that they were apart, not just from '71, but from '47 from the initial partition. Although there are a lot of Hindu Bangladeshis most of whom probably must be Bengali, Bengali speakers, there were no great efforts made and there was never much of an issue to get closer relations with West Bengal. You know, on the list of languages around the world, Bengali - and we do persist in saying Bengali for the language and Bangladeshi for the nationality - Bengali as around the sixth most spoken language in the world. It's easy to miss that because it's spoken in a part of the world which hasn't weighed very heavily in geopolitical affairs. On the Bangladeshi side, until very recent years when a few novelists have started to appear, especially women novelists, there wasn't much of a cultural history of literature either or music. On the West Bengal side there is a greater intellectual tradition. That goes with what I said earlier about the cultural difference between the Muslim and the Hindu Bengalis.

Q: Yes. Lately, a woman novelist has been having a lot of trouble from Bangladesh because she's moderately feminist I guess. Were we at all interested in the role of women there at the time or was this something we left, that was their problem?

LESSER: No, we had the Women in Development Program - WID - which AID had in a great many countries and we had a WID officer in the AID mission. There was a considerable willingness to support assistance to projects that were particularly aimed at women. One famous example is the Grameen Bank which was founded by a famous Bangladeshi whose name escapes me for the moment, but he's still around and he was the inspiration for a great many other such banks. This bank loans very small amounts of money to people in villages who do not have any other access to a monetary system

and the small amounts are large enough to buy well, let's say, a sewing machine or a farm animal and not much more. They found phenomenal success directing loans that rarely were more than $100 in value to people who then paid them off and made it the basis of little home businesses that generated some cash. The overwhelming majority of those loans were to women and that was understood from the beginning that this was going to benefit women first and foremost. So, we were strongly aware of the importance of women. I should also say that my ambassador, Howard Schaffer's wife, Teresita Schaffer, also a Senior Foreign Service Officer and subsequently an ambassador herself to Sri Lanka, for the tour of duty in Bangladesh she went on leave without pay and she did a little bit of work here and a little bit of work there. Like me, she was an economic officer and she did some work on the situation of women in Bangladesh. Her high profile meant that what she worked on got looked at by the Bangladeshis and by the powers that be here in Washington. So, yes, there was a lot of women-oriented development activity.

Q: This was during the Reagan administration?

LESSER: Yes, it was.

Q: How about family planning, birth control and all that, all that leads to abortion and the Reagan administration had very strong views on that.

LESSER: We had a strong population program. One of its characteristics was to promote contraceptive use and at that time, I'm not an expert on this, we were pushing to some extent a so-called cafeteria approach, which is to make all kinds of contraceptive services and methods available. There was particular emphasis on condoms for men and you could find condoms were available at an extremely low price because we were subsidizing them. The U.S. government provided them and the Bangladesh government distributed and they would charge an extremely nominal amount. They were available at all these little kiosk types of places, places by the side of the road that would sell individual cigarettes and things that people like to chew, just little odds and ends. It always included condoms and

so there was a lively market for condoms and presumably a lot of use. I think it's next to impossible to take a country like Bangladesh with an enormous number of people with a very low literacy rate, especially among women, but also low literacy by world standards among men, and great shortages of medically trained personnel and public health trained personnel and expect to have very dramatic results. So, I don't recall what kind of statistics there were and anyway, statistics on family planning tend to be a little suspect and population statistics about Bangladesh would be less than accurate as well. There was a program, a vigorous program. It was by the usual measures of such programs, relatively successful and well accepted. It did accord with the policy of the Bangladesh government and we did not to my recollection run into any objections or problems from Washington that we were going too far. I don't think we were going too far. We were not supporting abortions. No doubt there were abortions being performed in Bangladesh. I'm not familiar, I say that, I say no doubt, but I don't have any personal knowledge of that.

Q: Were you there during the flood time?

LESSER: Well, there's a flood time every year, but not every year is there a very serious flood. One year the streets of Dhaka were pretty thoroughly flooded for a few days and that was somewhat disruptive to activity in the city. They could have droughts, too and we experienced that. I don't have any dramatic recollections of being there for floods. These were a couple of normal years.

Q: Where did you go to get away from things? Could you travel up country or what would you do?

LESSER: Let me tell a little story about my ambassador. You know, the traditional idea of what a DCM does is essentially one big thing and also incidentally one other thing. The big thing is the DCM is the inside man or if he's a woman, the inside woman, who kind of keeps his eye on the operation and is pretty much available any time that something comes up. Keeping track of what the various agencies are doing and being aware of all of

the administrative stuff and scheduling stuff and like that. Okay, and that's certainly what Howie Schaffer wanted me to do. And he's the outside man, and since the DCM is also going to be the charge when the ambassador is out of the country, well, then that's the second thing. He's got to know enough about what the ambassador is doing so that he can step in and act for him. That was our basic arrangement. Early in my tour I became friendly with the Bangladeshi director of rural electrification a project receiving AID funding. Actually it was funded by a lot of donors in different parts of the country, but AID was the biggest donor and the program was modeled on our own rural electrification administration (which is one of the hardest names of an organization I've ever had to pronounce). “Rural electrification.” The director was a colonel on secondment, a colonel in the Bangladesh army, and he invited me to join him on the rural electrification boat for a long weekend down among the rivers in the Sunderbans, a part of the country which has almost no people, but does have man-eating tigers and is a very interesting geographical area. I said, gee, I'd like to do that and I went to Ambassador Schaffer and I said, I've had this invitation, could I go. He said, “Well, you know, Larry, I kind of picture you as being the inside man and trips like that are what I do. But since he's asked you and since it would be a little awkward for you to have to go and tell him that I told you you couldn't go, yes, of course you can go, but keep in mind what I said.” So, I went and I had a wonderful trip. It was a marvelous experience. But I made a mental note that I would never ask Howard Schaffer again for permission to travel up country or down country or anywhere beyond walking distance from our office, and I never again asked him. He made a lot of wonderful trips all over the country and I made two more trips both of them at his suggestion. One was when the country director for Bangladesh came out from the Department to spend a few days with us. Ambassador Schaffer and this fellow didn't get along particularly well, didn't like each other particularly well, and so Ambassador Schaffer said, “Larry, I have a trip for you. I would like you to take (I'm not going to mention his name) on a trip to Chittagong [the port city], and have a good time.”

Q: And keep him away from me.LESSER: And keep him away from me, that's right. So, I took that trip and very much enjoyed it. I saw some really fascinating things, the most fascinating of which was the ship-breaking industry of Bangladesh. Ship-breaking means that when a ship has reached the end of its useful life, they take it for its final voyage which is to go out into Chittagong Harbor, rev up the engines full blast and drive it right into the beach as high up on the beach as it will go and then little Liliputian people climb all over it with welding torches and take it apart. They sell the pieces, the scrap metal and anything which is salvageable like furniture and maybe machinery and the like. Bangladesh was one of the two or three important ship-breaking nations in the world. I watched ship-breaking on that trip. Then very late in my tour, this involved Chittagong again, we got the first ever U.S. naval ship visit to Bangladesh. A very nice, show the flag, thing, what you do with friendly countries, and the U.S. naval ship docked out in Chittagong Harbor because the port is too shallow to accommodate large ships, and Ambassador Schaffer went out there the first day and had a couple of ceremonial things. Then since my children were out visiting during that time, he said, "Larry, why don't you take your kids out?" We had a wonderful visit. At night on the ship we had a little launch that took us between the port and where the ship was three or four miles out at anchor. That was a wonderful trip and it was a very nice gesture on his part.

So, where did I go? When I had leave I would get out of the country, but not necessarily go very far. I went to Nepal and did a little bit of trekking on one occasion. I went to Bangkok, Thailand a couple of times because there was a direct air connection between Dhaka and Bangkok. Bangkok is a very interesting place. I went up country in Thailand on vacation and I even went to Calcutta for a vacation, arranged to stay at the Calcutta Club and I played golf in Calcutta for three or four days. That's where you went. There were people who went further afield. It's interesting that people, Bangladesh is a lovely country, but nobody in Nepal would come to Dhaka for vacation, nobody in Calcutta came to Dhaka for vacation and certainly nobody in Bangkok did. From our perspective all of those places

looked good for a little R&R.Q: What about, was there any pattern of Bangladeshis coming to the United States?

LESSER: Coming in what sense?

Q: Well, not really as visitors, but workers.

LESSER: There was a slow trickle of Bangladeshis. You encounter them now and that's probably what you have in mind: running restaurants. A very large number of Indian restaurants are actually Bangladeshi restaurants. Taxi drivers in a number of cities, particularly New York, include Bangladeshis. They had a pretty good system of the people who would come to the States helping the newcomers to find a place as many immigrant communities have done throughout American immigrant history, but compared to India, the number of Bangladeshis coming to America is very small. It just so happened, Stu, that this morning and today is the 2nd of October, 2002, I was mediating at the DC Superior Court in Small Claims and a group of six Bangladeshi jurists were ushered into the court because they're here on a little study trip. My mediation supervisors were not aware that I used to live in Bangladesh, but I've now told them and I got to talk with the visitors for a few minutes. That of course, that kind of flow of visitors to learn and then go back and apply some of it, that was happening almost continuously.

Q: Well, then you left in 1986? This is the time you're basically getting ready to retire, was that it?

LESSER: Yes. Okay, I had opened my window for competition for the Senior Foreign Service and under the rules, which I helped develop (to my regret), I had six years of eligibility. My last year in Bangladesh was the sixth year. I was waiting; the results of that sixth year had not been announced yet when the day of my departure came. I had a number of reasons for thinking that I would not be promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. (They're not related to things that we've talked about so far.) I was correct.

So, I flew out of Dhaka on the chosen day and I had decided to spend a few weeks making my way back to Washington. My first stop was Rangoon. Burma was the next-door neighbor, the only one besides India which shared a border with Bangladesh, and I was interested in seeing a bit of Burma. We had very difficult relations because, a very repressive Burmese military regime had already been in charge for quite a long time. We did not have good relations. I had arranged to stay overnight with my counterpart there who was a guy I had never met, but as a kind of professional courtesy he was going to let me stay with him the first night and then I worked something else out. When I got there I introduced myself to him and he said, “Oh, by the way the promotion list came out today, are you interested?” So, I took a look at it and saw that I had not been promoted and informed him and said, “You've just been the bearer of the news that next year I will be retiring involuntarily from the Foreign Service.” I could see a little bit of an uncomfortable look on his face thinking, “Oh, Jesus, that's just what I need. This guy is probably going to collapse in front of me. What am I supposed to do?” But, I handled it okay, Stu, you'd be proud of me. I didn't give him a hard time and the next day I met the newly arrived political counselor there who was an old friend and he invited me to join him on a trip up country and went to Pagan where there are astonishing fields of Hindu and Buddhists shrines to see right along the banks of the Irrawaddy River, really a sight to behold, utter serenity and mystery. I went to Mandalay and I had a wonderful trip there, made a couple of those stops on my way home, played golf in Manila with the Bangladeshi ambassador there who was a general (since deceased) who I admired very much, and came home and got back to Washington about five or six weeks later and got ready to do my last brief assignment before leaving the Service.

Okay, so I came back to Washington. I worked in the Office of Management Operations under the Under Secretary for Management, but I worked knowing that I was going to be a short timer, that I would be retiring as of September 30th, 1987 and I only got into the job in I guess November of '86. Just a personal note and you may want to talk more about it, I'm not sure how personal these oral histories ought to get, but here I am returning to

Washington with the end of my career now ordained, and the end of my marriage has now occurred as well. The deal that I had worked out with Harriet before I left that she would stay in Washington the first year and come out the second, we amended late in the first year and we made a decision that she wouldn't come out at all. She did visit a couple of times, but we decided that our relationship was changing, instead of being merely geographically separated that we were separated to reconsider whether the marriage was to endure further. It was a friendly enough decision, but obviously emotionally very wrenching. By the time I got back it had become clear that our marriage was going to end and then it was just a matter of doing it as cleanly and as nicely and as friendly as we possibly could. We accomplished that to our mutual satisfaction and we remain on good terms to this day. We have both remarried and we both remarried happily. At any rate I had to find a place to live now because I wasn't going to be living in my shared house any more and I had to think about what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I was going to be retiring from the Foreign Service at age 47 and I would have to do something, so I was working for a couple of people who were very understanding and very generous. They allowed me the time I needed to do some personal planning, but I also had moderately interesting work to do in management operations.

MO was in charge of managing resources in the broadest sense. One of the main resources was personnel. You have a Foreign Service and this applies specifically to Foreign Service. You have a number of positions, which are established, and you have a certain cadre of people to fill them. It is a challenge to keep those two concepts in reasonable balance so that bosses have an expectation that their positions will be filled. I think I talked about this a little bit in our previous conversation. [Note: Not true.] One of the areas I was in charge of was the small embassy program. That was the idea of having a model of what an embassy staffing pattern would be like in countries where we have only limited interests, like small African countries - and again that's a subject that I talked about a little bit before. It wasn't that difficult to have a small staff if only you could arrange that they had some reduction in work that made it possible to accomplish what

they were to do. Part of the problem was that there tended to be blanket requirements on all Foreign Service posts whether they had large staffs like Rome or for that matter, Dhaka, or tiny little staffs like in Lome, Togo or Papua New Guinea. So, we were to devise a program and the means of implementing it, because that's also complicated. You can say, well, you don't have to do those things, but you also have to be able to negotiate that with the originators which in many cases are other agencies which impose requirements on embassies. They have to reduce their expectations and understand that well, you can ask big embassies to do this, but you can't ask the small ones. So, that was an interesting program. I worked on that and a couple of other minor matters and when the time came I availed myself of the outplacement services of the State Department and went full time into the 90 day program so that even cut into the time I was in MO. I moved to New York City because by this time I was in a relationship with another woman, which didn't begin until my marriage was over. I moved up to New York City where I had grown up and gone to school. This woman who is now my wife was also a high school classmate of mine.

Q: What had she done?

LESSER: She was a clinical social worker and is to this day and she remained based in New York all those many years and has done some traveling and had been married and had one child and been divorced for a number of years when I met her again. We actually met at the 25th reunion of our high school class; we graduated high school in '57, and that's the only reunion that class has ever had. We had not dated in high school. We had our first date when I got back from Bangladesh, 29 years after we graduated from high school. The rest is history and I thank my lucky stars that I met Susan and that things turned out the way they did. There were people who said, gee, Larry, a double blow, your career and your marriage both ended at the same time. I very quickly came to believe and to tell people that yes, it's a test, a test of character, but you know, if both of those things are going to happen, you might as well have them happen at the same time and to go through it just once.

Q: So you can restructure your whole life?

LESSER: Yes, that's exactly right. So, it's turned out very, very well.

Q: So, briefly, what have you been doing since you retired?

LESSER: I went to New York thinking foolishly that I might find an interesting job there in short order, and I wasn't sure doing what, although I fancied myself by aptitude a writer and an editor. Of course, I mean, that's not crazy, writing and editing is a great deal of what I did in my Foreign Service career. It didn't work that way, however, and the first big break I got was about seven or eight months after I moved to New York, when the Office of Inspector General at State, with which I had been in touch, called. They didn't find me out of the blue. I'd been doing my networking and they came back and said you know, we're hiring WAEs [When Actually Employed] Retirees. So, I took up the offer to become a re-employed annuitant with OIG. I got married to Susan on June 3rd, 1988 and something like five days later I came back on the roles as a WAE inspector. Nothing too remarkable about that except that I got married in New York and was living in New York and I was now going back to work in Washington and be based in Washington and to travel to posts overseas for inspections. Although I'd been living with Susan for the better part of a year before we were married, for the first two years after we were married she lived in New York and I lived in Washington and we saw each other on weekends and vacation. Two years of that was enough and then she moved down to Washington and we've been together ever since and that's worked just fine. So, I inspected, I was generally the person looking at the reporting and representation functions, which means mostly looking at the political and economic sections of the embassies of Foreign Service posts that we inspected, and I was also the chief editor and compiler of the inspection report. If anybody is familiar with these reports will see that they tend to have surprisingly lengthy narratives and discussions of not only auditing types of things - where the money goes and how you use the people and property - but also the conduct of relations, what were our policy objectives with this country and what was our mission plan for carrying them out and

how well has the mission done so and how well have they coordinated with Washington and with the Department and with other agencies.

My first inspection was Australia, the summer of '88. I did the same function on inspections of Turkey, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Cameroon and that takes us through probably a year and a half or so. I then shifted over to the newly formed Office of Security Oversight within OIG. Because of the depth of security issues and after a bureaucratic battle essentially between State and CIA, State's IG was given responsibility for inspecting the security function in the broadest sense and in order to win that bureaucratic battle, State had promised that it would give a separate standing for security. Until then we had inspected security as part of the overall inspection, but now security was standing separately and was undertaken as a specialized inspection. A group of veteran highly qualified security officers including technical security people as well as physical security and personnel security were put together and formed into teams, with participation by the way from other agencies including the intelligence community, so that they were coordinated. There was no separate security inspection function by an intelligence agency. We did security inspections and made recommendations similar to the ones made in the standard conduct-of-relations inspections. So, what was I doing there? I wasn't a security expert. No, I wasn't. Security officers are very good at what they do. What they are not very good at is refining their findings in the form of reports and putting them ultimately into the form of recommendations that can be acted upon and can be tracked and that there would be some accountability in the system.Well, writing stuff and organizing material is what FSO generalists do and so they very quickly found that you needed one generalist on each of these inspection teams. I was that generalist with a series of teams and I did security inspections in a good many countries: Thailand, Taipei at the American Institute of Taipei, and Bahrain, Jordan, Algeria, Cote d'Ivoire. I never got to Latin American posts except for a few days in Mexico. I have never set foot in a Latin American country. I never got to go to Eastern Europe and to this day except for the former Yugoslavia I have never set foot in the Soviet Union or any of these kinds of countries.

Q: Were we particularly sensitive when you were dealing with Jordan and Bahrain to the problems of terrorism?

LESSER: Yes, of course. Particularly sensitive by that time of course we had the new requirements for physically secure U.S. government installations: the 100-foot setback requirements and berms and bollards and these kinds of things. The fact is you can't impose those overnight and most U.S. diplomatic places didn't meet those standards, so we had to make recommendations taking into account the cost considerations and the time considerations of what you would have to do in order to accomplish them. But, we were very attentive to things like hardlines in embassies, to physical security on perimeter even if you didn't have the recommended setback, and also to things like coordination with local security apparatus, the police and other agencies in the country and making sure that they took their responsibility seriously to protect diplomatic establishments in their country. We had to work more forcefully maybe a little less so in Algeria which was having problems and continues to have some problems now in keeping control of the country. As a general matter, the basic principles that we were there inspecting were well understood by all parties.

Q: Well, then you did this and then?

LESSER: Then I did even more. I'll run you right through it. There came a time when, well, I'll mix a couple of things because this happened before and after. I also worked in the audits division of OIG and the first major thing I did in the audits division was - this was actually a mixture of OSO and audits - we did a major, a first-ever inspection of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. You can see that it's a fairly obvious transition for me having done security inspections that I was once again the non-expert assigned to a very large team, which I think was 14 people doing a very lengthy inspection. It was called an inspection of diplomatic security, but the inspectors were all auditors, so with only one or two exceptions they were not security experts, they were civil service auditors. So, I was the editor and chief writer of this very lengthy report, which gained us quite a bit of kudos. The bureau

itself said that they found it useful and went right to work implementing. The ideal is that at the end of the inspection, the place should be better off for having been inspected and to the extent that there may have been voices in the wilderness saying you know, we could do a better job if we had thus and such. If they persuade the inspectors that that's true and we put it in the report and make it as a recommendation, well, then we've strengthened the hand of the people who have a good idea of where they ought to go. Although 14 people is a large team and we took a long time doing it, that inspection got high marks for being effective. Almost all of it is unclassified. Anybody who wants to do a history of U.S. security especially in the '80s and into the early '90s on how we protected our diplomatic installations could do worse than to read that report.

Then with the audits division I did another major audit a few years later of State Department support for U.S. business abroad and this harked back to my time which I described earlier when the commercial function moved over to the Department of Commerce and State lost its lead role and lost almost all of its commercial specialists, but Commerce only posted people to 65 or so countries where we had the largest amount of export trade. But we export all over the world, to another 100 countries, so to the extent there were to be trade promotion activities, they had to be conducted by State Department people in all of those other countries. That was the object of the audit, to see how State was staffing and carrying out that function and in connection with that I made visits to a number of countries that were in that secondary group, including my only return trip to Bangladesh, as well as Sri Lanka, and India as a counter example of a country where commerce is represented, but to see the coordination between Commerce and State because that's also an important element, and a couple of Middle Eastern countries.

Okay, that takes care of my State Department OIG activities. In the middle of that period I went to work for Peace Corps for two years and in Peace Corps Washington for part of the time I was the head of the policy and planning staff that also did statistical work to keep track of Peace Corps basic stats. The Peace Corps is not the best organized of entities. There's one good reason for that and it's called the five year rule, when Sergeant Shriver

came in and said we're not going to have careerists here, so nobody can stay working for Peace Corps for more than five years. That, over the years, informally got extended, but it still stayed short of being a career type of operation and so you don't have the same institutional memory that you normally find in government organizations and there's a kind of loosey-goosey quality. A lot of entrepreneurial possibilities for people and it's often difficult to track exactly how things got started or how they happened.

Just for example, if a congressman or his staff said we know that the Peace Corps is organized into four regions. Can you tell me how many countries we have Peace Corps programs in? We would say, well, I'll have to get back to you on that and then we would have to scratch our heads and say, well, exactly how do we define what constitutes a Peace Corps program? If we have a bilateral agreement with the country, but there are no volunteers there, is that a program? If we have volunteers, but no staff as we had in Rwanda when I was serving there with State, does that count as a program? If we have, if we've evacuated all the Americans, but we have Foreign Service National staff who are still salaried, but no activities going on except keeping the place open, is that a program? If we have two headquarters in the same country, as we had in Russia, is that two programs? If we have as we have in the Caribbean, seven independent tiny little mini countries and they all are administered out of one, is that seven programs? Peace Corps, it's not hard to ask those questions, but in my time and probably ever since, nobody has ever come up with exactly what the answers should be. So, we had an office, which over-ambitiously said, well, we'll get the answers. Well, I mean it's still worse if you say, well, how many volunteers are in our country? Well, we don't know. We also were in charge of keeping track of Peace Corps regulations and the Peace Corps handbook, which is issued to all volunteers, and various other kinds of manuals. It was very interesting work. I did it for a couple of years.

Then my temporary appointment ended and fortunately State's OIG still had some use for me and I stayed with OIG on and off until late '96 when I was appointed to the Foreign Service Grievance Board by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. By statute, members of

the board cannot be in an employee status with any of the agencies whose grievances we adjudicate. State, of course is the main agency. The others are AID and the little foreign services of Commerce and Agriculture. So, in order to accept that appointment I had to make myself no longer available to do WAE work with the inspector general. I did that with some regret because the grievance board is very part time, but it's worked out very well. So, that's my sole connection. I remain a member of the grievance board. I'm now in my third appointment period just starting my sixth year on the board.

Q: Can you give an example of sort of a major or a minor grievance that you did? I mean I don't want a whole list, but just what you got involved in.

LESSER: Yes, well, these grievances are workplace disputes. They are not related to the conduct of foreign relations. The most common grievances are around evaluations and promotions. That is, to give the most typical example, an officer is low-ranked by a selection board in the annual promotion competition and the officer is very unhappy and takes a closer look at his or her file and finds some objectionable things. Perhaps allegedly falsely prejudicial statements by people who rated them or reviewed them or some procedural area which has been prejudicial to them in competition. So, they file a grievance with the grievance staff of the relevant agency. That grievance is denied by the agency. (If the grievance is upheld by the agency, well, we would never see it. We only get appeals.) So, the grievance is denied by the agency, the employee then has the right to appeal to the Foreign Service Grievance Board, which is not part of the agency, and that's the final administrative step they can take to try and get relief from whatever harm they allege was done. If they lose at the level of the grievance board they can go to court and occasionally people do go to court and occasionally they win in court. That's the most typical.

We also in recent years have been getting a growing number of discipline case grievances and that follows a rather different course. Essentially, an agency seeks to impose discipline on an employee for something like poor judgment or for numerous security

violations or for some kind of misbehavior which is embarrassing to the U.S. government, and proposes to suspend the officer for a number of days. (We're not talking about criminal cases because those are not grievance cases. Those are handled by the Department of Justice.) So, these are discipline cases of people who are not being separated from the Service, but they appeal. They say no, no, it's all wrong, I never did it, it's a bad case, or yes I did it, but the penalty is too harsh and I appeal the penalty - I think it should be much lighter. So, we get those cases as well. The cases by the way are normally handled as paper cases. We don't have very many hearings. We can have them and in separation cases where the person's career is at stake, they're mandatory unless waived by the employee. The overwhelming majority of our cases are handled through paper submissions by the parties, that is, by the agency and by the grievant.

Q: You know, at one point, just by looking at the papers more than anything else, but a couple of years ago, maybe five years ago, sexual harassment was a big deal and now you don't hear much about it. I mean is it within the sort of the government things people pretty well learned to behave themselves or is it still a problem?

LESSER: That would be nice, wouldn't it? We've had a number of cases that relate to sexual misbehavior. Not a large number. It'll say on the board's annual report just what the number is, but I would venture a guess that we've had three, four, five or six cases a year for the last several years.

Q: So, it's not many really.

LESSER: It's not many, but that doesn't mean, this sounds like my story from New Delhi about how many hippies there are. Remember we only get a part of the iceberg. We get cases where they propose discipline, where the employee objects to the discipline and where they don't settle at agency level. So, how many more cases are there than the ones we see, I have no idea.

Q: You also just briefly you were mentioning you got involved in election monitoring.

LESSER: Yes.

Q: Did you get any impressions of these?

LESSER: Well, I'm about to go on my fourth election. The first one was Bosnia in 1998 and the other three have all been for the Kosovo elections of 2000, 2001 and this year's which will occur later this month. I've been an election supervisor for the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) in all four and supervisor is several steps more than monitoring because I am responsible for delivering a good election - supervising the conduct of the election in a polling station and the ballot counting, and delivering a good valid count after the election. My experience so far in the three that I've been to is that the OSCE is very, very good at running elections and supervising elections. The elections themselves, the mechanics of the elections themselves, the physical activities of election day up to and including the count and submitting the count and making the official count, has been very good. There has already been in Bosnia, and after this year it will probably begin in Kosovo as well, an evolution so that the OSCE will gradually recede from supervising to just monitoring. Now, if you take this as a discreet task, it's a very expensive task. It means bringing in last year in Kosovo, 1,600 international supervisors from 30-something countries and 2,000 of them the year before, parachuting them in for just a very few days, and then getting them back home, hiring enormous numbers of people. We also paid the local election committees. Plus, every international supervisor has his or her own interpreter and one driver to every two supervisors and you're paying for the driver's vehicle as well, and you've got to house your people and you've got to move them around from place to place.

Here's what we learned. If you're prepared to spend that kind of money, you can deliver one hell of a good election. So, congratulations international community and I don't mean to sound mocking. I think it is a remarkable accomplishment and it's probably a very good

investment, but it's a gamble, too because elections are only one small part of what a stable legitimate democratically oriented institutionally sound government does.

Q: Do your elections produce kind of what you want?

LESSER: I thought I answered that question. It produced exactly what we want. If you don't like the winning candidates and the policies that they carry out and if they turn out to be just as corrupt as the people before everything went to hell in a hand basket in the Balkans, well, folks what do you expect, it's only an election. It's not the last word. It delivers what it promises. If a whole lot of other things, I mean a whole hell of a lot of other things also go right, well, then you're going to have responsible members of the international community there. Well, good luck. I don't think the international community is putting the same level of resources into some of those other things and one has to question just how much the local people get it. They haven't addressed adequately the ethnic problems that underlay the split up of former Yugoslavia and elections don't do it either. If you can move them along in this institutional path and also find a way to resolve some of these other issues, well, then, yes, then you'll have it all.

Q: Okay, well, Larry, I think it's been a nice journey.

LESSER: Thank you very much. It's been a nice journey for me, too.

End of interview